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The Hudson Review

A magazine of literature and the arts

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TO OUR READERS

A new book by a Contributing Editor of THE HUDSON REVIEW has recently been published. In accordance with our policy, the book will not be reviewed in these pages, but is listed below for the interest of our readers:

BERT CARDULLO, editor: *The Film Criticism of Vernon Young.* University Press of America. $42.50.

Vernon Young was the film critic of THE HUDSON REVIEW from 1955 until his death in 1986; Bert Cardullo, his editor in this volume, became the film critic of THE HUDSON REVIEW in 1987.

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Comment:

A Common European Home

WITH THE SUDDEN RETREAT OF SOVIET POWER, Europe can be one if it chooses. It can achieve what President Gorbachev has called a common European home.

The question now is whether it does so choose and, if it does, what that home will be like. For the first time, its common destiny is suddenly a matter of decision. In theory it could be a nation, a federation like Australia or the United States, a confederation as loose as Switzerland before 1848, or no more than an association of sovereign states acting together, when they can agree, and maintaining a dialogue among themselves when they cannot. That last option, a Europe of nations—"l'Europe des patries"—is still in the short term the likeliest course. Though Charles de Gaulle always denied using it, the phrase is forever associated with his name, and it aptly describes what might be called the slow track of European integration. It sums up the British Conservative view of Mrs. Thatcher, too, and, since Labour's tardy conversion to Europe after 1987, probably the Labour view as well. So a Europe of nations is probable. Any free union, after all, is likely to occur at a pace and in a form dictated by its most cautious and reluctant members.

Fast or slow, the effects could be formidable. Since the European Community of Twelve already numbers 320 millions and is entertaining applications from ex-socialist states like Hungary, it is likely to number 400 millions and more by the first years of the new century: a total which, along with its wealth, looks ready to guarantee it a place among the superpowers. It may be even more than that. There is no assurance that the Soviet Union can survive within its present borders or that China can recover from the dead hand imposed by its régime after the Peking massacre of June 1989. The twenty-first century, in a word, could be the century of Europe.

What would such a Europe mean?

The question itself is not meaningless. Nations and unions of nations can indeed mean something, though the assumption that they should is rather recent in human history. The USSR has meant Marxism, the United States free enterprise, Japan since 1945 affluence without armaments. No nation, it is true, has to mean in order to exist and flourish, but it would be surprising if the new Europe were

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meaningless, even if its eventual meaning were to defy definition. It is, after all, the continent of ideas, much as Asia is the continent of religions. That is at once its glory and its shame. Some of its ideas, notably Marxism and Fascism, have wrecked it in recent times, which makes for wariness. But it does not seem ready to draw the conclusion of mere intellectual indifference. Of course Europe will mean something, to itself and to the world. It may be interesting to ask what.

The question has been asked and answered before, but the old answers no longer serve. To the Middle Ages the answer was in terms of Christendom; to post-Reformation Europe, humanism and the classical heritage. The sense of unity had fatally weakened by the nineteenth century, however, and when Bismarck denied Europe he was probably speaking for most or many in his age: "Whoever speaks of Europe is wrong: it is only a geographical concept." Now Europe wants an answer to that question all over again. The paradox is that it has lost the sense of Europe even as it has gained the fact. When Britain belatedly joined the European Community in January 1973—to be followed, less reluctantly but no less slowly, by Spain and Portugal—it meant an economic union that embraced the whole continent west of the River Elbe, and for the first time; and when the single market is achieved in 1992, it promises to mean the end of protected markets for over 300 million people. Even if its evolution were to stop there, it would be stupefying to contemplate. Amazing that such an achievement should be unaccompanied by popular or intellectual enthusiasm; doubly amazing that hardly anyone has noticed the need for any.

The larger paradox is that the idea of Europe and the fact of Europe have for centuries so commonly existed apart. Medieval Christendom, though a sentiment, was not a political or economic fact, and its chief foreign adventure, the Crusades, ended in division and disaster. Renaissance humanism was an intellectual idea, in the sense of an idea for intellectuals, but it gave no impulse to political union, which was not even part of its agenda; and Italy, where it was born, remained a shifting chaos of petty states and foreign zones of influence for centuries to come. The Second World War produced some highly practical blueprints, like Jean Monnet's, for economic cooperation and ultimate union, along with some airy notions on the part of literary intellectuals wholly isolated from economic and political reality. In 1946, for example, T.S. Eliot, an American-born poet who had naturalized as a Briton nearly twenty years before, gave three broadcast talks to a defeated Germany which were collected in that year as *Die Einheit der europäischen Kultur*. Writing as an Anglican and a conservative, he called the civilization of Europe Christian: not because he imagined that all great European artists and writers had been Christian, which he knew they had not, but because the art of Europe is indelibly marked by Christianity even when it opposes it. "Only a Christian culture could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche." These German broadcasts, which

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were shortly afterwards included in English translation in his *Notes towards a Definition of Culture* (1948), make a striking and in many ways a plausible case for seeing even anti-Christianity, when it is European, as impregnated by the Judaeo-Christian spirit. Minds are as powerfully shaped by what they oppose as by what they embrace, by what they abandon as by what they are faithful to; but the argument, like a lot of late Eliot, is essentially cautious and without political consequences. Most Christians, in any case, live outside Europe. Doris Lessing has recently offered a bolder hypothesis, and one Eliot would have been temperamentally incapable of entertaining, when in a 1989 radio interview she remarked that the "mind-set" of Christianity and Marxism, those two great rival faiths of the century, are extraordinarily similar: an age of sin (or capitalism) leading to a mighty convulsion wrought by a leader or messiah and followed by a reign of peace and justice. Speaking as an ex-Marxist she affirmed in that remark how indispensable the Judaeo-Christian tradition had been even to the godless heresy of revolutionary socialism; and if Nazism, in its turn, was a heresy of Marxism, as Hitler sometimes confessed to his aides—Hermann Rauschning's *Hitler Speaks* (1939) contains some highly frank admissions on the matter–then there is a still more dangerous argument to be ventured here about the Christian tradition of Europe, in its ultimate effects, and one that hardly anybody nowadays would willingly pursue. Of course Eliot was right, in 1946, to see Christianity as fundamental to the European tradition. The trouble is that Christianity is not at one, as Yugoslavia and Ireland tragically prove; and if you allow tradition-by-reaction into the argument and let in Voltaire and Nietzsche, not to mention Stalin and Hitler, you are left with a tradition fundamentally divisive and ultimately self-destructive.

Eliot died in January 1965, in the same month as Winston Churchill. Neither lived to see British entry into the European Community eight years later; neither showed any interest in the institutions of Brussels. Since both men in their later years were British patriots, Union-Jack style, there is no reason to suppose they would have had any enthusiasm for the considerable cession of sovereignty involved in signing the Treaty of Rome, even in its amended form. Eliot, though he began his life in London in 1914 as a Frenchified American, was ultimately anti-cosmopolitan; and Churchill in old age was a partisan of an expiring imperial idea where Britain was imagined to stand at the center of what he grandly called "the three majestic circles" of Europe, the Commonwealth and the Atlantic alliance. Both views, the insular-Anglican and the British great-power fantasy, now belong to history, and neither has much to say to the Europe of the year 2000, which is likely to be prevailingly secular and far too preoccupied with its own problems to seek or need an imperial role.

Europe is moving towards union, then—first economic, and soon political—without a sense of purpose, a popular cause, or a meaning. It is a unity without a myth. It has no sovereign, for example, or single

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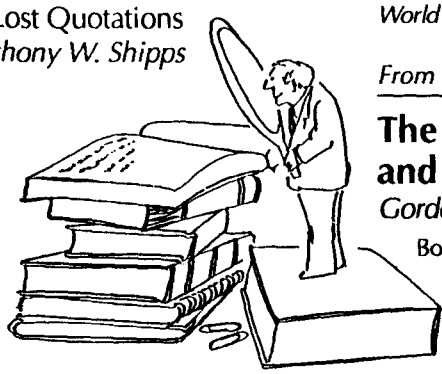

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leader; and though it has a flag—gold stars on blue—very few Europeans would recognize it when they saw it. This is an extraordinary omission. In Greek mythology the maiden Europa was carried off by a lascivious god in the form of a bull, which at least suggests some powerful moving force; the founders of the American republic had the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to inspire them, or at least to shape their rhetoric; the Soviet Union, in its day, had Marxism. Europe has plenty of ideas, but it is without a master idea. It has parliamentary democracy, popular affluence, state welfare and a tradition of peaceful tolerance and the rule of law, even if ten of its twelve Community members are plagued by terrorist fringe-groups like the Basque nationalists, the Italian Red Brigades and the Irish Republican Army. But one can hardly call parliamentary welfare statism an idea. It is more like an efficient compromise formula for suburban contentment. The new Europe, already rich, wants to get richer and to rock no boats. There is no bull in sight, no disposition to rape or be raped. Europe plans no crusades. It neither has nor seeks a fashionable view of civic life, still less of spiritual life, in any manner peculiar to itself. Its recent preference for the free market, so pronounced that even parties called socialist now clamor for it, is something it shares with the rest of the world. It is singularly, almost ostentatiously contented. No one, as the French often remark, has ever seen Paris in so unseething a state—"la France s'ennuie": no Existentialism, no Marxism, no dominant gurus. It is polite, cheerful and tame. That new mood arose after 1980, when Europe suddenly lost its taste for re-enacting nineteenth-century fantasies about race war and class war. Since then some late heresies of nineteenth-century Marxism like *La Nouvelle Critique* and Deconstruction have followed Marxism itself into the dustbin, and for the first time in the century Paris is notably off the boil. And if Paris cannot boil, nobody can. The academic leaders of Europe, meanwhile, when they are not purveying soberly useful information to career-conscious students, are talking whimsies designed to titillate a public that has abandoned any taste for conviction it ever had. Its gurus have descended to the giggle, *fin-de-siècle* style, as if mindful of the old phrase about the Naughty Nineties. "There are so many things lacking in this world," I heard Umberto Eco say to a lecture-audience the other day, in characteristic style, "that if one more thing were lacking there would be no room for it." The audience, plainly expecting that sort of thing from the author of *The Name of the Rose*, looked gratified or faintly indifferent, and was content merely to smile.

It is tempting to say that this rococo mood, or non-mood, cannot go on.

That is all too likely, but it must be conceded that the alternatives may all be worse. Europe is now enjoying a *Belle Epoque*, and a sheer impatience of spirit may induce it to give it up. We have heard of the

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end of ideology before, and the prediction always proved false: certainly prosperity, as the 1960s proved, does not reliably kill off violent utopian dreams. In the 1945 election, which he lost, Winston Churchill promised the British people "sunny uplands," and perhaps that is where Europe is now, though it has taken more than his lifetime to get there. He also spoke of the leisured classes giving place to the leisured masses, a prediction that has proved altogether accurate and just. The skepticism of the young that accompanies all this is a marked phenomenon of the new age; the last collective enthusiasm for general ideas in academic life, after all, was French critical theory in the 1970s, and that was itself a species of radical skepticism, a highly dogmatic kind of doubt. In a recent philosophical treatise, *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989), Richard Rorty, a child of that era, has concluded that skepticism, to which he prefers to give other names, is the only wear for modern man. It is not even certain, he argues doggedly, that two plus two equals four, consoling us with the reflection that at least "you can say it without getting hurt," adding that if we take care of freedom, "truth can look after itself." Truth always could, but all that sounds like thin gruel for the believer; and certainly no crusader, whether for God or radical ideology, was ever content with as little as that. But it is a view still favored by some advanced spirits, and it has the merit of being harmless and suiting a mood of withdrawal and comfort-seeking ease.

The end of conviction, or its temporary surcease, has its charms as well as its material advantages, and the end of Marxism is perhaps a little like the end of paganism. "The decline of the gods," C.S. Lewis wrote in *The Allegory of Love* (1936), speaking of the last years of the Roman Empire, "from deity to hypostasis and from hypostasis to decoration, was not . . . a history sheer loss," since decoration admits of romance, with poets "free to invent, beyond the limits of the possible, regions of strangeness and beauty for their own sake." Europe may now be entering such a period of decorative romance. It has largely abandoned religion except as private consolation or family ritual. It has abandoned radical ideology, too, mindful of the failure of 1917, 1933 and 1968. Revolution is not the wear. It is now in a mood for the strange, the beautiful and the whimsical. It is given to amiable imaginings rather than conviction. Easily bored, it is ready to be amused rather than persuaded, and it views its political leaders with the experimental detachment of a supermarket shopper loyal to no brand name and ever ready to try a new taste.

Such, it may be, is the Europe now promised for the twenty-first century: a great power, perhaps, but one reluctant to flex its muscles and temperamentally indifferent to any call to a crusade; rich but cautious in giving, rootedly unidealistic, skeptical. It has taken a long time—far longer than the lifetime of anyone now living—to achieve that precarious state of non-belief. For most of the modern era

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Europe has been the cradle of momentous ideas that demanded dedication, blood-sacrifice and death. It has been a theater, over two millennia, for rival armies and celebrated wars; and it is the place out of which all the world-languages grew. Now, as if none of that had happened, it is rich, tranquil and faintly smug. "We feel like poor relations now," a Californian remarked to me the other day, on a visit to England. Odd that Europe should have found such beatitude only in defeat. For nearly half a century it has watched the decay of its empires, British, French, Dutch, Spanish and finally Portuguese, and the dominance of the world stage by two alien superpowers: at best, in those years, a place where world statesmen met or changed planes. Now only Russia, among the European states, has kept its Asian empire, and it may not keep it for long. Europe, meanwhile, has discovered that it is richer and stronger without its empires than it ever was with them; and even its post-imperial age, like its imperial, has faded into history.

And all that time, it is now clear, it was waiting, and what it was waiting for is now here. Its present state has little to do with Churchillian dreams of greatness or Eliot's vision of a Christendom miraculously reborn. It defines itself not even altogether clearly as a way of life, since secular consumerism is widely known beyond its shores. "We have a common culture," the Bishop of Worcester has recently told the House of Lords (May 16, 1990), introducing a parliamentary debate on European cultural cooperation, "a common faith and some common experience of democratic institutions." But to the very end definition of that common culture eludes. Europe is an autonomy of spirit, best characterized by the thought that, if one wakes up in it, one knows one is nowhere else. Hard to say why, but one must try to say it, and an American novelist once did. In *Of Time and the River* (1935) Thomas Wolfe spoke memorably of the "wool-soft air of Europe," as palpable as a living substance:

> It was there now; it will always be there . . . The wet, woolen air is over Munich; it is over Paris; it is over Rouen and Madame Bovary; it soaks into England; . . . it soaks into the land of Europe, and keeps the grass green.

It is there in its café-life, he might have added, in its ever-proximity to the sea, in its ancient villages and its glimpses from fast trains of manicured fields. It is like nothing else. Even its overseas fragments, such as Australasia and the Americas, do not look like that or feel like that, though they speak its languages and read its books. It has been waiting for longer than anyone can remember, and now that it is here it is somehow beyond all speech, all giving and all love. It is simply itself.

GEORGE WATSON

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Letter from Leeds

DEAR H,

During the past school year, 1989 to 1990, I have been director of Vanderbilt University's junior year abroad program at the University of Leeds in north central England and have taught in that university's School of English. My main teaching duties have involved tutoring sections of a course called Practical Criticism, based originally on I. A. Richards' classic study of poetry. The course has another title as well, Introduction to the Study of English Literature, since the genres covered have included fiction and drama as well as poetry. During the past two years the course has undergone a radical change. Instead of introducing first year college students to the study of poetry, fiction, and drama, it has been redesigned to introduce them to the study of the twentieth century's most sophisticated critical theories of literature, excluding Anglo-American New Criticism.

None of my students this year was an English major, though I don't think that teaching what are called honors students here would have made my task any different. I was asked to teach first year English minors or subsidiary I students, subsid I's for short. Along with them, there were the students of North Riding College. This is a teacher's college in Scarborough, a resort town on the North Sea in North Yorkshire, famed as the residence of the playwright Alan Ayckbourn and his acting company. It is less well known for the fact that North Riding College's English department had, as I was told, "run away together." The North Riding students are farmed out to various northern universities to pursue their specializations for a year before returning to their education courses. English specialists come to the University of Leeds. Among their courses is Practical Criticism. It is generally believed that they should have less expected of them than honors students or subsid I's. Still, the new Prac Crit/Intro to Eng Lit could not be altered just to suit them. What to do, i.e., how to divide them among those teaching tutorial sections? There were some two dozen North Riding students. I agreed to take them all.

Classes began in October. By then, the heat of England's unusual summer and the continued balminess of its early fall were replaced by days of cold rain and frequent grim overcast. I had five sections of Prac Crit to tutor, each of about ten students. They would attend lectures and discuss them and their reading in their tutorials. Typical English university procedure. For the first term, our reading would include the works of the Russian Formalists, the semiology of Ferdinand de Saussure, and essays by structuralists, like Roland Barthes. After a month-long break over Christmas, we would return to the many theories grouped under reader response criticism, the many

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applications of Marxist thought in Marxist literary criticism, and the quickly evolving theories of feminist literary criticism. We would also look ahead to post-structuralism and the slippery hindquarters of Jacques Derrida. In the third term, we would wrap things up, finish papers, and the students would study for and take their final exams.

We would not be reading anything by the New Critics from either side of the Atlantic or applying their methods because their approach to literature was already well known by the students. So went the reasoning of the planners for this course.

The School of English offices and classrooms are contained in older red brick buildings on the southern side of campus, facing downtown Leeds. Most tutors have offices large enough to contain a class of a dozen or so students. Mine was not large enough, so I met my tutorial sections in a regular classroom. Throughout the year, the room would be cold when we entered it. There was a gas stove, with a pilot light that did not work. To light it, I would thrust a lit match through the grill and carefully turn on the gas. The first time I did this, the igniting *whoosh* sizzled the hair on the back of my right hand into smoking black punctuation marks. I fell back with a yelp, but it broke the ice with my students.

I began by expressing my reservations about the course. We had only one literary work to read and discuss, Tolstoy's short story, "Strider, the Story of a Horse." Victor Shklovsky had examined this story in the early years of the century and discovered in it elements of "defamiliarization," that *sine qua non* of Russian Formalist criticism, the combustion in the matchhead. Otherwise our texts included collections of essays and a glossary of literary terms. Often the essays made no allusion to literature or they discussed works with which the students were unfamiliar. Presumably the students would apply these theories in their other literature classes, like their class in Shakespeare. But in our class, we had only "Strider, the Story of a Horse."

We also had Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, his essays about popular culture in France in the early fifties, including his long discourse on how he applied Saussure in order to demythologize contemporary bourgeois myths. But contemporary French culture of the early fifties tended to elude my students. They had long lived with things made of plastic, of much more advanced kinds than the sort Barthes deplored. And popular culture itself, which Barthes sniffed at like an oenologist, they knew as the *vin ordinaire* of their existence. No reason for excitement or censure, particularly. Or for analysis.

The challenge was to find a way to discuss literature as well as literary theory. There was only so far Tolstoy's story could be stretched. And though we ran it long and hard, we read other things, too. Because they are compact, easily portable, and, in their range, more various than any other genre of literature, poems became the main source of class discussion.

Yet language itself was often our subject, if not always a manifest

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one. As an American with an accent created by numerous factors, including the regional one of growing up in Southern California but also a period during my childhood when I lived in Scotland, I admitted that I must sound pretty strange to my students, that perhaps my speech defamiliarized the English language for them. But they were more familiar with American accents from TV and movies, than I was with theirs. I heard broad northern accents from either side of the Pennines, the flat inflections of the Midlands, West Country sounds that reminded me of Tennessee, and an assortment of toffee-nosed southern speech.

A woman with the flaming red hair and pale blue eyes left here by the Vikings spoke up in class early in the year and I asked her to repeat what she had said. I was sure it was my fault, but her blush made her freckles run together, and she insisted that she was to blame. It was embarrassing to ask her again to repeat herself. After a number of conversations with her, now I can hear the English I am listening for in the Geordie dialect that she speaks as a native of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. We agreed it was odd knowing that as soon as we opened our mouths in Leeds we would be identified as strangers.

Moments like these brought Russian Formalism and Saussure to life, in a way, while at the same time making semiology problematic. Wasn't there some essential thing—communication—we hoped to achieve that language was failing? Certainly, with deference to Saussure, we would hear the arbitrary differences in our habits of speech, but we also wished to impart information and we both thought we were speaking the same language.

For the Russian Formalists, I showed the class Craig Raine's poem "A Martian Sends a Postcard Home" and we discussed the "ostranenie" of its riddles. For Saussure and his formulas of the signifier and the signified, of paradigm and syntagm, of word values based solely on difference, we read "Jabberwocky." It was fun detecting the shiftiness that existed between the sounds of words and their potential meanings, especially since Carroll's nonsense invited us to play with it. On late afternoons, after the time changed, night began falling as quickly as, later this spring, it would tend to hold off. We read David Wagoner's "Song to Accompany the Bearer of Bad News" and talked about how sentences put together in one order could seem just as inevitable cut up and appearing in another order, if they made sense. On evenings when we stood with collars turned up in the bus queue below the limestone neo-classical facade of the university library, I reflected on how successful or wise it had been to apply Barthes's structuralism to Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier" or Robert Frost's "The Gift Outright." I felt much better talking about the narrative theory of Genette and Raleigh's sonnet "Three Things There Be That Prosper Up Apace." I even said excitedly to my drowsy late Thursday tutorial, dozing in the swollen heat of the gas fire as sleet pattered like rice on the windows, that Raleigh's understanding of his son's

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behavior and its consequence—hanging—was its own critique. We didn't need structuralism when the poem itself was its own key! I read them Stevens' "The Man on the Dump" to demonstrate further, but felt a barrier between us after the silence of "Where was it one first heard of the truth? The the." It was time for Christmas break.

We all attended lectures during the first term, as well. An introductory lecture, a lecture on Russian Formalism, and one on Saussure. There was to have been one on structuralism, too, but rumor had it that the lecturer, a part-time cross-country coach, was with his team abroad. He called in sick. These lectures were held in part of the modernistic complex that occupies about one third of the campus. Gazing upon this area I tended to think, because of his recent criticism of modern architecture, "Prince Charles is right." Inside the complex are long corridors with rubber floors. Down these corridors the human figure diminishes to a speck, with shoes squeaking. The building that housed the lecture rooms has enlarged fluted bulges and looks like a pipe organ knocked askew on one side. On the other side, near the roof, a statue made of bronze or some other metal hangs. A figure in academic robes, it appears to be in rapid descent toward the fountain below. We met in a lecture theater and sat in long rows of fold-down, padded pews, each row with its own door. Our lecturer on Saussure was well informed and endowed with a strong, clear voice, but he puzzled us all with the visual aids on the overhead projector. Our lecturer on Russian Formalism mumbled to the first row.

Throughout the course I wondered what I was doing. But during the first term I looked ahead to the second term, particularly to Marxist literary theory. I thought my English students must have grown up with a more objective view of Marxism than I had. After all, outside the Safeway in our neighborhood in Leeds, hawkers sold *Marxism Today* and *Living Marxism*. But my students had little or no familiarity with Marx and his theories. We all watched the collapse of the Soviet empire in Eastern Europe with a good deal of excitement, though some among my colleagues and in the media rued the passing of the opportunity for real socialism. But when it came to their actual associations with Marxism, the best my students could come up with was the color red and Marx's grave in London.

My students at the University of Leeds were, in fact, very much like my students in America. They were part of a culture, indeed, but it was not the one they were learning about in the university. The university culture was full of facts and assumptions, ideas and beliefs, that were either unfamiliar or had never been named within my students' hearing. University was the last chance to pass on a set of values for which, it was very possible, they had no use, not to say need. Their culture was signified in the black, skin-tight clothes some men wore, the deliberate pallor some women affected, and a general post-modern raggedness, as if they all had roles in a play by Samuel Beckett. My North Riding students, as future primary school teach-

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ers, tended to make less of a statement with their dress. But except for the gorgeous saris and pantsuits of the Asians, my English students dressed drably or in sooty attire that made them resemble old tattoos. Many assumed a kind of languor as well. But the flash of an earring in a male ear or a jewel drilled into the side of a female nostril or the change overnight of hair from blonde to magenta suggested an undercurrent, something important that was probably none of my business.

But why was I teaching critical approaches to literature instead of literature? Was it to teach my students how to read one another instead of books? Russian Formalism, semiology, structuralism, and Marxist literary theory all pretended to be scientific. Marxist theory went so far as to claim for itself alone a detached view that no other humanist criticism ever achieved. Some feminist critics abjured humanism altogether, with its corrupt sense of the universal. All seemed to say that literature was devious and untrustworthy, but literary theory was a science. It would explain the world.

We began the second term with reader response theory and it was a big hit. The sublime baloney of Stanley Fish and his dismantling of other readings of "The Tyger" and his proposal that Blake's poem could as easily be about indigestion as about good or evil had enormous appeal. Reader response theory suggested that all readings were valid, all equally authentic. It penetrated to the heart of something about literature that had been planted in my students. Literature had to be studied because it made no sense. A theory made sense, especially one that said, "Don't worry. Whatever comes to mind is *your* reading of the poem and no one should intimidate you into thinking you are wrong." We read James Fenton's scathing, surreal, narrative poem "The Skip." I explained that if I had not learned that a British skip was different from an American dumpster, I might have had some fairly erroneous notions about the poem. We read Donald Justice's "Poem" and John Ashbery's "Paradoxes and Oxymorons." I believe this was the only time during the course when I felt compelled to tell a student, after he interpreted a poem, that he was wrong.

Our weeks back after Christmas, during January and February, took us on a wild carousel of weather that made it into the international news. The hurricane hit on January 25. As I descended from my bus that night a tree snapped off by the gale fell on a car in front of the bus, pinning a young nurse inside it and severing her arm. Throughout February we had days in which all the known weather of this island would revolve—sun, rain, sleet, snow, sun again, all sped by bitter wind. I could hear Stanley Fish saying it was all valid, neither bad nor good. One kind of weather was the same as another. But the British said, "Global warming."

Marxist literary theory stimulated some of the most curious responses. The lecturer himself, when he discussed Lukács' reflection theory and Althusser's schemes of the repressive state apparatus and

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the ideological state apparatus, confessed that given recent events, it might seem irrelevant to consider Marxist literary theory at all. But he insisted that its use of dialectic made it a potent oppositional tool. While he spoke he made sweeping motions with his arm as if brushing crumbs from the long countertop in front of him. He described *Hamlet* as a play that dealt with English worries about Elizabeth's succession and *Lear* as a pessimistic view of Jacobean optimism. One of my smartest students, an otherworldly and usually silent young woman, said she thought the lecture was "brilliant." This word is the current superlative and is often abbreviated. My children use it to describe an especially good birthday party: "It was brill!" But Marxism also baffled my students. One asked if the word "dialectic" referred to the role of one's dialect in determining social and economic class.

We ended our course with readings in feminist literary theory. Feminist literary theory *per se* has changed a lot in the past twenty years, so much so that Elaine Showalter is considered an early feminist and her images of women approach a primitive beginning. Contemporary feminists are involved in the gender issues embedded in language and seek Derrida for guidance, or they are Marxists. But my students, especially the women, included few if any feminist sympathizers. For many *feminist* meant a woman with an extreme political position. The grossest comment was a caricature of "crewcut lesbians on motorcycles." I had hoped to discuss poems by Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Christina Rossetti, together with contemporary poems by the young Scot Carol Ann Duffy and the new poet from Ireland, Joan McBreen. But I couldn't imagine a sensitive response to issues of gender in their poems, when feminism had been personified that way. My landlady had left us a house full of books; among them (she is the mother of two grown children) a copy of the English edition of Dr. Spock's *Baby and Child Care*. It dated from 1973. Its passages about the working mother and the role of the father appeared to have been little revised from the first edition in the late 1940s. I copied them and showed them to my students. The women, especially those who had the cartoonish view of feminists, hooted at the good doctor's advice. "This is what your parents were reading when you were toddlers," I said. After that we were able to talk about the poems without too much prejudice.

The lecture dealt with gender in *Richard III*. It was a look at the crossover of the masculine and feminine in Shakespeare's day. But the power went out in the lecture theater as the lecturer was concluding her remarks and though the doors at the end of each row were opened to admit light, still she spoke to us from a dark well, and we were a sparse audience.

Toward the end of the second term the English department chairman asked me how I thought the course was going. It had been a bad day. She had noticed me in the general office and I think had

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asked me the question only in passing, not expecting much of an answer. I told her the course was a boondoggle from start to finish. No one should be expected to teach or take an introduction to English literature based only on critical texts, especially *these* critical texts. I said it was bass ackwards, goofy footed, out in left field. I expressed myself in additional foreign clichés. She asked me if I would be so kind as to put my thoughts in writing.

Now in the third term we have entered the period of final examinations. It is mid-spring and the hazy warm days that have arrived remind me of the Los Angeles basin at this time of year. The air is full of gnats. The rhododendrons, especially vivid in overcast weather, are blooming. A mildness has come in which most things can be forgiven, but with it, sadly, a fear that ahead lies another dry summer and the threat not only of drought but of drastic climatic changes. The North Riding students and subsid I's that I taught were equally qualified, although the former had more motivation to pass, since their careers as teachers depended on it. The year has had a full measure of events totally unrelated to modern critical theory. Yet I think I can see how some of the most important ones do relate. The events in Eastern Europe. The sequestration of Salman Rushdie. And the popular response to Britain's new community charge, the poll tax.

To my surprise, my students' final evaluations of this course have been overwhelmingly positive. They felt it gave them a freedom to look at literature in new ways. They had had no idea that so many ways of reading literature existed. Freedom was the word that turned up in more than one conversation I had in our last conferences. I told them I was amazed, but I supposed I had to be pleased. "Didn't you find it confusing," I asked, "when I told you I didn't understand our reading?" No, that had been refreshing, they said. Human. They weren't used to it. And they weren't used to such freedom.

I don't think I am referring here to Derrida's idea of play. That idea proposes that a word has no essential meaning or value. The freedom my students were responding to *is* something essential and its meaning cannot be deferred for long. It is something the people of Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, and Romania clearly wanted. It is something Salman Rushdie has clearly lost. And it is something the British consider they might be lacking, since the poll tax has been imposed upon them without their consent. It is an essence and the desire for it is universal. Taking their lead from Saussure and Derrida, the hippest of the critics we read this year scorned "essence" and "universality." Though they may have shown my students new ways to read, I think they're still missing something.

MARK JARMAN

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Calendar of Readings 1990-91

September	17	William Styron reads from his memoir *Darkness Visible*
	23	Wallace Stegner and David Leavitt
	25	Writers-at-Work Live Interview: Donald Hall is interviewed by Peter Stitt
	25	Donald Hall and Frank Bidart read from their work
	30	MEXICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL I Homero Aridjis, Marco Antonio Montes de Oca
October	8	MEXICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL II Octavio Paz is interviewed by Alfred MaçAdam
	8	Octavio Paz reads from his work
	15	MEXICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL III Elena Poniatowska and poet Jose Emilio Pacheco
	22	Josephine Jacobsen and Anne Winters
	29	John Edgar Wideman and Terry McMillan
November	5	Claire Bloom: An Evening of Poetry and Music
	12	GEOGRAPHIES I: Barry Lopez reads from his work
	19	Writers-at-Work Live Interview: Reynolds Price is interviewed by Frederick Busch
	19	Reynolds Price reads from his work
	26	Don DeLillo and Paul Auster
December		POETS AND PAINTERS:
	3	John Ashbery, Jane Freilicher, Kenneth Koch, Larry Rivers
	10	Robert Creeley, Brice Marden, Jorie Graham, Eric Fischl
	17	John Hollander, Wayne Thiebaud, Mark Strand, William Bailey
January	14	John Barth and John Hawkes
	21	August Wilson
	28	WRITERS ON NEW YORK: Joyce Johnson, Alfred Kazin and Phillip Lopate
February	4	Doris Lessing
	11	THE TENTH MUSE I: Amy Clampitt introduces Julia Budenz, Melissa Green and Kathleen Norris
	25	Norman Mailer reads from his new novel
	27	MEXICAN LITERATURE FESTIVAL IV Carlos Fuentes
March	4	Robert Hass and Daniel Halpern
	11	Amos Oz, Israeli novelist and essayist
	18	Hayden Carruth and Lynne Sharon Schwartz
	25	THE TENTH MUSE II: Galway Kinnell introduces Carol Conroy, Toi Derricotte and Li-Young Lee
April	1	GEOGRAPHIES II: Rick Bass and Gretel Ehrlich
	8	Philip Levine and Linda Bierds
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	22	Writers-at-Work Live Interview: Denise Levertov is interviewed by Deborah Digges
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CLARA CLAIBORNE PARK

Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes

When the Author died in France in 1968, it was Roland Barthes who with his essay "La mort de l'auteur" administered the *coup de grâce*. Jacques Derrida had already warned, in *Of Grammatology*, of the frivolity of thinking that "'Descartes,' 'Leibniz,' 'Rousseau,' 'Hegel,' are names of authors," since they indicated "neither identities nor causes," but rather "the name of a problem." Michel Foucault would later record an "author-function" arising out of the "scission" between "the author" and "the actual writer." The subtext for all three shimmered in the Parisian spring, in the great year of academic revolution, when the students took to the streets and even the sacred *baccalauréat* felt the tremor. Barthes's way of putting it was somewhat more inspiriting than the transmogrification of authors into functions or problems: "We know now that a text is not a line of words releasing a single 'theological' meaning (the 'message' of the Author-God) but a multi-dimensional space, in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." What Barthes was celebrating, in language permeated with the rhetoric of liberation, was release from the very idea of an origin; it was nothing less than that staple of the sixties, the death of God.

Barthes made sure his language told the story. The Author is "believed in"; his image is to be "desacralized," and with it his theological meaning. He is the God, "the origin, the authority, the Father" (as Barthes would write two years later), and not a very nice one. Literature is centered on him "tyrannically"; his "sway" is "powerful"; the new literature, now to be renamed *writing*, "liberates"; the Author is a myth it is "necessary to overthrow." Criticism, as Barthes would tell *L'Express* in 1970, could participate in "a kind of collective action." (Asked what it did, he answered, "It destroys.") The text, and the reader, are

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prisoners in the Bastille. With the erasure of the Author-God, the text, escaped from its Great Original, is revealed as an infinite regress of prior traces, of language, of ideas, of societal memories and assumptions. For "to give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing," and the reading with it. To dissolve the Author is to inaugurate that exhilaratingly "anti-theological activity," the conversion of literature to *écriture*, which "ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it." It is "an activity that is truly revolutionary since to refuse to fix meaning is, in the end, to refuse God and his hypostases—reason, science, law."

To the reader coming in late, and from over the water, the excitement may be somewhat hard to understand. Certainly revolutionaries of the word are easier to live with (and to embrace) than the other kind. But what is all the verbal shooting about? Is this Author-God, this Freudian Father ("a somewhat decrepit deity," Barthes would later call him) anybody we know?

Sixty years ago, like many American children, I had a game of Authors. It was geared to seven-year-olds, about the simplest game there was to play, on a level with Go Fish—a pack of cards with four suits, headed by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, Edgar Allan Poe, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. (Not Melville back then, not Whitman, not Dickinson or Thoreau—an early lesson in the temporality of canons.) From the cards we learned such truths as that Longfellow wrote *Evangeline* and Holmes *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. Naturally, we did not learn to think of the Author as God, Father, or even (*Whittier?*) as an Authority. And even had we been English children, with a deck displaying Shelley, Keats, Tennyson, and Browning, we wouldn't have learned it either. To be able to associate authors with God, let alone with his institutional hypostases, you have to be French.

In 1635, in a book significantly entitled *De l'Esclaircissement des temps*, a portrait appeared of the powerful politician who the year before had founded the Académie Française, Armand Jean du Plessis, duc de Richelieu. From the Cardinal's head, as if prefiguring the Sun-King whose effulgence his policies

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prepared, shone forty rays of light. Each of those rays bore the name of an Academician—an Author.

Shall we try to imagine an analogous representation in an English-speaking context? No English prime minister has ever exercised Richelieu's absolute power. Had he done so, it remains inconceivable that the most sycophantic artist could ever have rayed forth from his head the names, say, of Milton, Dryden, Shadwell, and thirty-seven more, to Enlighten the Times with their harmonious and even brightness. Nor can we conceive of an English prime minister—still less an American president—concerning himself to create, as Richelieu did, an institution to regularize the national language, guard its purity, and impose upon its primary public literature, the drama, binding rules of literary practice. We are likely to imagine that a chief of state, even if he is not a cardinal, has more important things to do. But that too is to think an English-speaking thought. Long before Barthes, before Derrida, before Foucault, Richelieu had made the connection between Authors and Authority, between language and power. The relation of the dramatic Unities to monarchical unity, of literary Decorum to political and social conformity, was neither coincidental nor the expression of a vague French Zeitgeist, an Esprit des Temps. As David Kramer has recently shown,[1] the Academy and its projects were a deliberate response to the exigencies of an absolutism emerging from a century of fragmentation and religious war. The Rules, literary and linguistic, imposed by Richelieu's Academy expressed the absolute vision of what was to be Le Grand Siècle while helping to bring it into being.

It was Richelieu's Academy indeed. Perceiving their potential usefulness—or danger—he had by fiat institutionalized the cheerfully intellectual discussions of a group of literary friends, who were something less than enthusiastic to see their informal gatherings transmuted into an assembly of forty so-called Immortals. Some wished to decline the honor, but since Richelieu had forbidden unlicensed assemblies they thought better of it. "The Academy's statutes," Kramer reminds us, "were drawn up, not by a poet or a playwright, but by a *Conseiller*

[1] David Bruce Kramer, *'Tis a Drama of Our Own Invention: Dryden's Theatrical Practice and the French*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Princeton University, 1987.

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d'Etat." The Immortals, when not raying directly from Richelieu's head, were in his pocket. He awarded pensions at will. "No one could be so much as proposed for election unless he was 'agréable au protecteur.' " All projects and decisions had to be likewise agreeable; many of them were directly suggested by the protector. The Academy's first and continuing project, the codification and purification of French, was initially undertaken so that the conquering tongue could be more readily learned by those whom the Cardinal's military campaigns were to subject to the glory of the crown. This was the original impetus for the great French Dictionary. Language was a means of control; French was to spread French *civilisation* abroad, as Latin had. It would equally set limits on what could be written—and thought—at home. We may, if we like, imagine a world in which Dr. Johnson composed his Dictionary not to make the money he told Boswell every sane man wrote for, but to enhance the glory of the Hanoverian monarchy. That done, we have to imagine him thinking of himself as one of forty immortals and not laughing. It isn't easy.

It was, then, more than the afflatus of the sixties that impelled Barthes to kill the Author, and rebel against "a language political in its origin" . . . "born at the moment when the upper classes wished . . . to convert the particularity of their writing into a universal language." Though there were contemporary reasons to proclaim liberation from the heavy rod of the Father-God, Barthes's sense of urgency, of need, of triumph was rooted deep in the historic soil of France. Only in France would it be possible to claim, as Barthes already had in "Authors and Writers" (1960), that "for the entire classical capitalist period, i.e. from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century . . . the uncontested owners of the language, and they alone, were authors"; that "no one else spoke." *No one else spoke.* The outrageousness of the hyperbole bespeaks its urgency. For when Barthes describes a "literary discourse subjected to rules of use, genre, and composition more or less immutable from Marot to Verlaine, from Montaigne to Gide," it is not hyperbole, but a truism of French literary history. "The certitudes of language . . . the imperatives of the structure of the genre"—these are not Barthes's own dismissive sarcasms, but the words of Professor Raymond Picard, a critic sufficiently infuriated by

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the originality of Barthes's criticism to call his "Nouvelle Critique" a "Nouvelle Imposture." Outside France, his essay *On Racine* wouldn't have raised an eyebrow. But in France those certitudes and imperatives *exist*, for everything from drama to orthography; one challenges them at one's peril. The walls of the prison house of language are far thicker in France.

What rayed forth from Richelieu's head was exactly that clarity later to be called Cartesian, the absolute and simple brightness of the "clear and distinct ideas" that Descartes thought he could find in his own mind and from them validate a universe; *la clarté cartésienne* was the visual manifestation of what Foucault calls "the great utopia of a perfectly transparent language." Barthes had already written, in *Mythologies*, of that "blissful clarity," how it "abolishes the complexity of human acts," giving them "the simplicity of essences," organizing "a world without contradictions because it is without depth, a world . . . wallowing in the evident." The myth was powerful enough, even in America, that an American graduate student could be told to read Kant in a French translation, because (*bien sûr*, this was forty years ago) it was impossible to be obscure in French. Clarity was the glory of that class monopoly, "the great French language," whose "lexicon and euphony," Barthes notes in "Authors and Writers," could be "respectfully preserved" even through that "greatest paroxysm of French history," the Revolution. Though nineteenth-century authors might broaden, even transform that language, they were still its "acknowledged owners." Let us reactivate our English-speaking incredulity: it is quite simply inconceivable to us that authors, of all people, could even in imagination own a language. We speak and write a language that from its beginnings has been the product not of authority but of receptivity, of foreign influence and invasion, that from the time of its greatest poet, and in his person, has been defined by its rich intransigence, its falls into obscurity, its resistance to purity or purification. For us as for Shakespeare, language has been the product not of Authors, but of people talking.

But Barthes, with Derrida and Foucault and fifty million other Frenchmen, grew up within the secure structures of the great French language. There were forty Immortals in their youth, and there are forty Immortals today, three hundred and

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fifty years after Richelieu and two hundred years after that revolutionary paroxysm which nevertheless scarcely interrupted the Academy's guardianship over the integrity of French. Americans from time to time are made aware of the Immortals, as during the flap over the admission of the late Marguerite Yourcenar, and we are reminded that this is something that seems to matter—to matter less, presumably, than when three brilliant French minds were being formed by an educational system whose director was said to have claimed that he knew what page in what book every French schoolchild was turning on a given day, but still far more than we can readily imagine. The Quarante Immortels are still at work on their Dictionary. A centralized educational system still guarantees that a whole nation invests its emotions in the idea of an authoritative language. Summering in a country village, the astonished foreigner is lectured on what is and is not permissible French by the man who retails fish from door to door. Someone encountered in a train, asked to explain a word he has probably known all his life, defines it, then quickly adds, "But that's not French." It is, of course, *argot*—what we'd call slang, rich and self-renewing like any popular speech. When Victor Hugo introduced a few phrases of thieves' argot into *Les Misérables*, he appended thousands of words of justification. Authority is defined by power, and power is defined by its ability to forbid. That the vocabulary of classic French drama is confined to some 2500 words (2000, says Barthes, for Racine) as against Shakespeare's 25,000 is not just a quirk of literary history, still less of national character. It is the product of conscious decision. Though the vocabulary of permissible French is of course very much larger today, it is still defined by exclusion.

Helen Vendler[2] has described the "intellectual formation of a French child attracted to literature"—the *cahier* (the obligatory blot-free notebook), the *dictée*, the *manuel littéraire* enshrining every received idea of literary history—and has noted Barthes's own awareness of "how little he could escape from this training." Barthes, in *S/Z*, describes it considerably more

[2] Helen Vendler, "The Medley Is the Message," *New York Review of Books*, May 8, 1986.

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abstractly: "a predetermination of messages, as in secondary-school education." But the structures of French civilization are formed long before its élite attends the lycée, which is what Barthes understands by secondary education. The certitudes and imperatives of French are encountered much earlier. Few of the children whose education Lawrence Wylie describes in his *Village in the Vaucluse* would ever reach secondary school. Yet in their elementary classroom the Cartesian light still shone, clear and sharp, mandating a dedication to abstract formulation, to analysis, to classification that readers of contemporary French theory will find eerily familiar. American amateurs of the School of Paris may compare Wylie's description with their own grade-school experience and ponder how it applies to their favorite authors—or texts—as these exemplify it at once in conformity and rebellion.

> In teaching morals, grammar, arithmetic, and science the teacher always follows the same method. She first introduces a principle or rule that each pupil is supposed to memorize so thoroughly that it can be repeated on any occasion without the slightest faltering. Then a concrete illustration or problem is presented and studied or solved in the light of the principle. More problems or examples are given until the children can recognize the abstract principle implicit in the concrete circumstance. . . . The principle itself is not questioned and is hardly discussed.

"Children," Wylie observes, "are not encouraged to formulate principles independently on the basis of an examination of concrete cases. They are given the impression that principles exist autonomously . . . always there: immutable and constant. One can only learn to recognize . . . and accept them." French education is not Baconian; its motion is not inductive but deductive. English-speaking readers may recall a flicker of surprise upon discovering that "empirical" is not, for French theorists, a word of praise.

In approaching a subject, "the children are first presented with a general framework which they are asked to memorize. . . . An isolated fact is unimportant in itself. It assumes importance only when one recognizes [the] relationship . . . of the part to the whole." Applied to literature, this ensures that "no attempt is made to understand or to appreciate the text which is presented to the class until it has been thoroughly . . .

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analyzed, . . . broken down into its logical divisions, and the author's purpose in each division . . . explained. . . . Thus a child comes to believe that every fact, every phenomenon . . . is an integral part of a larger unit," intelligible "only if their proper relationship is recognized." "To approach problems with these assumptions is to approach them sensibly, reasonably, logically, and therefore . . . correctly."

French, of course, "is recognized as the most important subject taught. . . . Any other subject may be slighted or sacrificed in order to increase the time for drill" in the proper use of *la langue maternelle*. Wylie notes how hard it is for an Anglo-Saxon "to comprehend how essential this language study is to the French." Yet this is what we must comprehend if we are to appreciate the sense of free air breathed at last that pervades Barthes's *écriture*. Though so difficult a writing must severely, if regretfully, limit Equality and Fraternity, Liberty's banner floats triumphant, celebrating freedom from the Author/Father/God, from his "predetermined messages," his tyrannical intentions; from the imposed interpretation that wallows in the evident; from consistency; from logic. To rebel against the Author is to challenge Authority in a way neither imaginable nor necessary in an educational culture which valorizes the wayward and the polyphonic; which begs reluctant students to question principles they would much rather accept; and where no author (just ask one) has authority over language or anything else.

Barthes opens *Le Plaisir du texte*, his celebration of the delight of reading, with imagining

> an individual . . . who would abolish within himself all barriers, all classes, all exclusions, not by syncretism but by simply getting rid of that old specter: *logical contradiction*; who would mix up all kinds of languages, even those thought incompatible; who would mutely endure all the accusations of illogicality, of infidelity; who would remain impassive in the face of Socratic irony (which works by leading the other to the supreme opprobrium: *to contradict oneself*) and of legal terrorism (how much penal evidence is founded on a psychology of consistency!). That man would be in our society the lowest of the low; the courts, the school, the asylum, ordinary

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conversation would make him a stranger: who endures contradiction without shame?

Any reader whose pleasure has been taken largely in texts written in English will recognize an accent, even in translation. From Chaucer to Sterne to Salman Rushdie, the glory of English has been the mixing up of languages thought incompatible. And only in French could "illogicality" be associated with "infidelity." The translator of the American edition was forced to render *infidélité* as "incongruity" lest he stymie the English-speaking reader in mid-sentence. *Infidelity?* To whom? To whom but the Author-God, with his "hierarchical sentence," his tyrannical meanings; with his hypostases of law, science, reason; with his fixation on logical consistency. God is *French.* That great rebel against the Rules, Victor Hugo, could still write with perfect naturalness in *Les Misérables* that "artistic peoples are logical peoples," since "the ideal is nothing but the culmination of logic, just as beauty is the apex of truth." No wonder Barthes complained, defending *Sur Racine*, that the *classes supérieures*, universalizing their own ideal of language, put forward "la 'logique' française" as "une logique absolue." The disclaiming quotes are, of course, Barthes's own.

Who endures contradiction without shame? Barthes's language vacillates here, as he likes it to do, with its initial suggestion that it's the representatives of school, court, and asylum who can't bear to be contradicted by Barthes's "counter-hero," the reader-writer taking his free pleasure. But "shame" takes us back to that *abjection* which I have translated as "the lowest of the low," to the shame of a Frenchman who has been caught out in a logical contradiction. *C'n'est pas logique!* Even the superficial tourist has heard it, in the racket of a train station or screamed on a playground: the continuing battle cry of Cartesian clarity.

Who, then, can endure the shame of logical contradiction? English shouts its answer. Emerson can endure it ("A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds"); Whitman can endure it ("Do I contradict myself? Very well then I contradict myself"); Blake can endure it; the metaphysicals can endure it. Shakespeare can endure it. Sir Philip Sidney, cosmopolite and aristocrat, his own French almost accentless, rejected a "mungrell Tragy-comedie" that mingled kings and clowns. Shake-

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speare went right ahead, befouling the purity of tragedy with comic gravediggers who spoke the people's prose. Voltaire hated the gravediggers, though there were a lot of things he admired in Shakespeare; you don't come across such barbarities in Racine.

French intellectuals, of course, do not read Emerson or Whitman; they read Poe, who is *plus logique*. And they generally read in French. Barthes refers to "The Purloined Letter" in Mallarmé's translation. Though he does quote Blake (a single Proverb of Hell) he quotes in French, and his reference is not to *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* but to a book (in translation) by Norman O. Brown. He seems unaware of the literature of modernism in English; there is an extraordinary passage in *Plaisir* in which he describes the experience of sitting in a bar, amusing himself by enumerating its "whole stereophony" of "music, conversations, noises of chairs, of glasses," the "little voices" which dissolve the hierarchical sentence into the "non-sentence." It is as if Joyce's "Sirens" had never been written—or translated. "Why," he asks, in his autobiography, "so little talent for foreign languages?" English at the lycée was "boring (*Queen Mab*, *David Copperfield*, *She Stoops to Conquer*)." The candor is characteristic and disarming; still, so comfortable an admission is unexpected from someone who feels so intensely the difference between one word and another, and emphasizes the distinction between denotation and connotation as if he had discovered it. Though he excoriated the "narcissisme linguistique" of the guardians of the "idiome sacré," French is for him "nothing more or less than the umbilical language." It is in French he writes, in French he reads (with occasional hints of German and Italian); it is to the readers and writers of *la langue maternelle* that he addresses his *écriture*.

So it is curious that it is not in France that his work has acquired its maximum power. There the liberation of the text from the structures of decorum, of consistency, of logic could be felt as an exhilarating duty. Let its false and deceptive unity dissolve, its meanings float free, in "a paradise of words" a "happy Babel" in which "one may hear the grain of the gullet, the patina of consonants, the voluptuousness of vowels," and exult in the amorous perversity (his word) of an *écriture* that "granulates, . . . crackles, . . . caresses, . . . grates, . . . cuts,": and

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at last, joyously, "*comes*." But how perverse is that perversity for readers whose experience of literature has been formed by the happy Babel of Chaucer, of Shakespeare, of Carroll and Lear and Joyce? What needs exploring is why these quintessentially French linguistic preoccupations have found so warm a welcome in an educational culture so different from, even antithetic to, that of France.

After all, it's been fifty years and more that English and American criticism has been preoccupied with language; with metaphors and metaphorical systems (Caroline Spurgeon got us started in 1930); with the referentiality of poetic statement (I.A. Richards and T.S. Eliot in the twenties); with the layered suggestiveness which makes words rejoice as they fend off all attempts at paraphrase. French students learn that their greatest playwright wrote the speeches out in prose to cast into alexandrines; in classical French "no word," wrote Barthes (*Writing Degree Zero*, R 55) "has a density by itself." Here few students who undergo Introduction to Literature escape an exercise expressly designed to raise their consciousness of verbal densities. The distinction between denotation and connotation has been a staple of freshman writing texts ever since this year's retirees can remember. The inseparability of content and form is a truism: as Cleanth Brooks wrote in 1938, in words destined to inform introductory literature courses in colleges, then high schools, all over America, "the experience that [the poet] 'communicates' is itself created by the organization of the symbols he uses," so that "the total poem is therefore the communication, and indistinguishable from it." The sentence, including its suspicion of communication, could be Barthes's own. As he would put it twenty-one years later, with characteristic abstraction, "signification [is] the union of what signifies and what is signified . . . neither form nor content, but the proceedings between them."

Barthes's Author-God emitted "messages" in 1968: Brooks and Robert Penn Warren had warned American teenagers to stop hunting them thirty years before. Barthes put the Author's intentionality in question; "the intentional fallacy" hit American criticism in 1946. Did New Critics direct us away from the poet to The Poem Itself? In 1963, so did Barthes, rejecting traditional criticism's interest in "coordinating the details of a

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work with the details of a life" in favor of an "immanent analysis" functioning "in a realm purely internal to the work," "a criticism which establishes itself within the work and posits its relation to the world only after having entirely described it from within."

Nor could it have surprised an English-speaker to have read that "the Word in poetry can never be untrue," shining as it does "with an infinite freedom," "preparing to radiate toward innumerable and uncertain connections." For how many years have we been telling each other that poetic language is inexhaustible? In French, however, ambiguity is not a positive value: my *Larousse de poche* defines it as "a defect of that which is equivocal." We may cheer, then, as Barthes in 1963 converts defect to virtue and tells the French establishment that "each time we write ambiguously enough to suspend meaning . . . writing releases a question . . . gives the world an energy . . . permits us to breathe." Indeed, breathing wasn't all that easy; Barthes would soon have to defend against professorial attack his "right" (imagine it!) to read in Racine's "literal discourse" "other senses which [he was still stepping gingerly] do not contradict it." But though his valorization of ambiguity might be news to the French Academy, the American academy had started amusing itself with seven types of ambiguity in 1930. Thrilling as it is to read of language as "an immense halo of implications" making "knowledge festive" with words "flung out as projections, explosions, vibrations, devices, flavors," readers whose language long before Hopkins embraced "all things counter, original, spare, strange," must take it as confirmation rather than battle cry.

Even deconstruction has a familiar ring. Excise the word "personal" from the following; guess the writer; guess the date: "That radical mode of romantic polysemism in which the latent personal significance of a narrative poem is found not merely to underlie, but to contradict and cancel the surface intention." In 1966, confronting Picard, Barthes was still leery of contradiction. In 1953, M. H. Abrams was as much at home with it as Blake had been in 1790.

Nor can Barthes's amorous embrace of the concrete, of the physical object seem radical, though it may surprise us as we persevere through aridities of abstraction which, while less

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extensive than those in Foucault and Derrida, are equally uninviting to the Anglo-American explorer. Empiricism informs English-speaking style as well as English-speaking epistemology. Freshman composition texts are as one in discouraging abstraction and enjoining specificity; like McGuffey before them, they do their best to get American students, in Wylie's words, "to formulate principles independently on the basis of an examination of concrete cases." Helen Vendler's examples of "compositional subjects of the sort set for French students—'Arrogance,' 'Ease,' 'Coincidence' "—would appear, if at all, only to illustrate the kind of subject to avoid. Barthes too believes in concreteness. Outraged when Picard accuses him of "an inhuman abstraction," he insists that "the works of *la nouvelle critique* are very rarely abstract, because they treat of substances and objects." Reversing the deductive method taught the French pupil, he "starts," he says "from a sensuous object, and then hopes to meet in his work with the possibility of finding an *abstraction* for it" (italics his). He complains of the classic taste that considers objects "trivial," incongruous when introduced "into a rational discourse"; he commits himself to the object in full physicality he likes to call erotic; his "body," he says, "cannot accommodate itself to *generality*, the generality that is in language." The language is a bit warm for a freshman text, but the message (you should excuse the expression) is wholly familiar.

American critics, intellectual historians, and pedagogues, however, are not among the prior traces which constitute the text called Roland Barthes, which is entirely truthful in saying in 1963 ("What is Criticism?") that French criticism "owes little or nothing to Anglo-American criticism." (The Anglo-American texts Barthes does refer to address very different preoccupations: Bruno Bettelheim, D. W. Winnicott, Alan Watts, Norman O. Brown.) The relation of La Nouvelle Critique to The New Criticism is *post*, not *propter*.

What, then, explains our fascination? There is, of course, a peculiar pleasure in re-encountering one's own *idées reçues*, especially when expressed with an elegant difficulty that lends them the dark glow of revelation. From New to Nouvelle was an easy transition, as the case of Hillis Miller shows. The transatlantic breezes started blowing just as the New began to seem old

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hat. Barthes was affirming, with supremely French intelligence, the pieties of English 101.

But of course there's more to it. In retrospect, the New Critics seem surprisingly modest. They might distrust "messages," but they were comfortable enough with meanings. They left epistemology alone; they had no aspirations to philosophy or psychology. Though they discouraged biographical approaches, though they directed attention from poet to speaker and novelist to narrator, though they might (some of them) bracket authorial intentions, they didn't meddle with the idea of the self. But if authorial selves are (in the words of Vincent Leitch) "fabrications . . . interpretations . . . effects of language, not causes," why should our own selves be any different? As Frank Lentricchia puts it, "the self is an intersubjective construct formed by cultural systems over which the individual person has no control." A heady idea, the dissolution of the self; if personal responsibility dissolves along with it, it's a well-known revolutionary maxim that you can't make an omelet without breaking eggs.

Because there *is* more to it than old wine in new bottles. There is true exhilaration about the dissolving of certainties, the breaking of tablets. "Damn braces: bless relaxes," said Blake, in the book he began in 1789. The New Critics had scarcely been revolutionaries, literary or philosophical, least of all political. Yet the familiarity of their ideas could pave the way to the Paris of '68. Though the shadow of the Author-God did not reach across the sea, though the guardians and structures of English possessed minimal power either to preserve or coerce, though these were French texts speaking to the French, still they had their message for American intellectuals living in a country whose imperial impositions were increasingly difficult to ignore or justify. They aimed at the Author, but their target was Power. We could imagine with them a grand international democracy of power-free language—or if that were an impossible dream, we could at least proclaim our awareness of the invisibly tyrannical habits of our discourse. In the disillusioned seventies and the shameful eighties, there were new, progressive uses for our old New Critical techniques. They could be applied to any writing. "Literature" was only a category, as artificial as any of those frozen seventeenth-century genres.

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Guilt of nationality, class, and gender could revivify a tired scrutiny. For there is a politics of language. Orwell had told us that in 1946, in his blunt, concrete, English way; thirty years after, we could examine the matter with new French subtlety.

And somewhere in the last paragraph irony gives way to appreciation. Barthes would have recognized the movement: of reversal, of the statement no sooner made than put in question, of contradiction not merely acknowledged but embraced. One may—I do—question the cost-free radicalism, so much easier than actual political engagement, of our American warriors of theory, called to no undertaking more heroic than the reading of these admittedly exigent texts and the acquisition of a *parole* which now, in universities all over the country, itself exerts the power to require, insist, and exclude. For academics who have joined the club, the return of grand theory has brought not risk but a bonanza of renewal, liberating them into a hermeneutic paradise of publication where the professional reader (not the hapless freshman, who retains the privilege of getting things wrong) is Adam, forever encountering beasts that invite him to name them anew. Critical theory, I'm told, is a game; you don't have to play it unless you enjoy it. But power games are rarely optional. Barthes, like Foucault, like Derrida, had something more radical in mind than the substitution of one linguistic tyranny for another.

For they were French. A true radicalism goes to the root; theirs attacked the root assumptions of an unusually restrictive socio-politico-linguistic culture. There was a heroism in their assault on *clarté*, their determination to validate a darkness all the richer by contrast with that vaunted *ésclaircissement*, to honor the category of what Foucault called "the unthought." It's even explicable, though it would have surprised, then appalled Orwell, that stylistic obscurity should join the other insignia of liberation, the *étandards sanglants* of the good fight they were fighting.

Their status as revolutionaries was helped, of course, by the unique history of the French seventeenth century, which permitted such a ready association of oppressive structures of literature with oppressive structures of economics and of class. A phrase like Barthes's "the entire classical capitalist period" won't work in England or America, neither of which has a

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classical tradition you could put in your eye. In France it is at least intelligible. With "capitalist" functioning as negative shorthand in literature as well as economics, Barthes could claim a radicalism just as genuine as Sartre's, and a lot more subtle. Though Susan Sontag admires Barthes, she calls him a dandy. That's not wholly fair. When he rejects political engagement for a different responsibility, the responsibility to his umbilical language, it is more than mere aestheticism. The radicalism was genuine, the status as outsider absolutely real. In his fragmentary autobiography, Barthes defines himself as his culture had defined him: religiously, sexually, and academically marginal. "Who does not feel how *natural* it is, in France, to be Catholic, married, and properly accredited with the right degrees?" He wasn't, he tells us, even right-handed. We should not forget that the game American insiders now play was originally an enterprise of risk.

Barthes meant it about power. His essays were *essais* in Montaigne's original sense, tentative, trials of ideas. In his last decade even these came to seem too domineering, too insistently coherent, too "classical"; better to relax, to group paragraphs under topic headings, in alphabetical order, open to the aleatory air. Thus *The Pleasure of the Text, Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, A Lover's Discourse.* Aleatory was a favorite word. Perhaps, to do him justice, that's the way this essay should end, miming his progress from the impersonal to the personal, from the essay's assertive form—thesis, argument, conclusion—to something more wavering, more faithful to the moods of thought, its tenuous demands, how it's always escaping, from reader, from writer, yet can't escape its paradoxical consistency, its message, its loyalty to the values of a lifetime. The older you get, the more everything you write and do connects, yes, into a self. What Keats, who didn't get old, called soul-making. So:

Abstraction: How could he escape it? And though we may grumble for a more fraternal ratio of specific to general, we had better appreciate it. Abstraction, analysis, is just so much *harder* than concrete specificity, not just to read but to do. Anybody can learn to be specific, and most of our freshmen will. But try setting them to write on Arrogance, Coincidence, or Ease. To discuss an abstraction and produce anything but truisms you

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have really to think. In *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes produces eight pages (in ten short takes) of analysis of the "holophrase" I-love-you. Here's just a bit of it:

> *I-love-you* is active. It affirms itself as force—against . . . the thousand forces of the world, which are, all of them, disparaging forces (science, *doxa*, reality, reason, etc.). Or again: against language. Just as the *amen* is at the limit of language, without collusion with its system . . . so the proffering of love (*I-love-you*) stands at the limit of syntax, welcomes tautology (*I-love-you* means *I-love-you*), rejects the servility of the Sentence . . . is not a sign, but plays against the signs.

No wonder we're impressed. As Dr. Faustus said, "Sweet Analytics, 'tis thou hast ravish'd me." As well they might. But they don't always. "The actantial model" may "stand the test of a large number of narratives," but it's hard to keep our attention on "the regulated transformations (replacements, confusions, duplications, substitutions) . . . of an actantial typology" through page after page when the ratio of generalization to example is about 50 to 1.

Assertion: how nicely RB tries to avoid it, sure that it can't be done. "The work is always dogmatic"; the author's (his word) "silences, his regrets, his naivetés, his scruples, his fears, everything that would make the work fraternal—none of this can pass into the written object." The sentence is by nature assertive; "writing *declares*"; "there is no such thing as a generous language." Perhaps. But that's what he tried for.

Author: in *RB by RB*, RB reproduces without comment a secondary school exam question on a passage he had written twenty-four years and hundreds of thousands of words ago. He knows, who better, that he has become the Author. Style, he wrote then, is "a way of speaking, a lexicon . . . born of the body and the past of the writer . . . an autarchic language . . . its depths in the personal and secret mythology of the author." Do I contradict myself? Very well, I contain multitudes.

Boredom: has an entry to itself in *The Pleasure of the Text*, pervades his writing about literature/life. Who, he asks, reads a classic text without skipping? The word "nausea" too recurs, as in this from *S/Z*: "The referential codes have a kind of emetic virtue, they bring on nausea by the boredom, conformism, and disgust that establishes them." Master of a tradition that bores

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him, he sticks with it; he doesn't go foraging abroad, or open a backward window on Villon or Rabelais. What are you going to *do* with a story like "Sarrasine"? Forget it, we might say, but Barthes is *French*; the myth of the great French language is *his* myth, however he demythicizes; Balzac is *his* Author. Skipping is one solution; another is to read into, read around, read under—having already dissolved the Author, so the question of whether to credit him with all these new pluralizing riches needn't arise. Here's a technique that can work with any text one's read so many times one can no longer imagine what it might be to encounter freshly what it says. RB liberated, alas, not so much the reader as the professor.

Bourgeois: show them no mercy. Functions, like "capitalist," as a simple pejorative. Nobody is nicer, more generous than RB, yet he depersonalizes with a word. For him, Marx joins with Flaubert to evoke in mid-twentieth century M. Homais and the boredom of Yonville. The domain of the bourgeois is the domain of the "self-evident," of the "violence" of unexamined conventions, of those who are "content to utter *what is self-evident, what follows of itself*: the 'natural' is, in short, *the ultimate outrage*." The emphasis, of course, his. Though he rejected stereotypes, including those of the left, he held on to this one.

Dilettante: What he was. In its fine, original sense. He did read skippingly, skim over the flowers, take what he could use, leave it behind when it came to bore him, committed not to philosophy but to pleasure. Unlike ourselves, who now take him so seriously.

Fragments: RB on himself, in his not very impersonal third-person: "His first, or nearly first text (1942) consists of fragments, . . . 'because incoherence is preferable to a distorting order.' Since then . . . he has never stopped writing in brief bursts. . . ." As in "Fragments d'un discours amoureux," which precisely does not equal "A lover's discourse."

Freedom: the primary, pervasive value. From the self-evident, from the classic, from the bourgeois, from what he called the *Doxa*; from Nature which is not nature but nurture; from the "binary prison" of conventional sexuality, text and sexuality released together. Released from what? Ah, there's the rub. "From meaning." To "achieve a state of infinite expansion," in a text of enjoyment, of *jouissance*, a text which "comes."

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Grammar: Abstract by its very nature, who in English can write like this about it?

> Obsolete in spoken French, the preterite, which is the cornerstone of Narration, always signifies the presence of Art. . . . Its function is no longer that of a tense [but] to reduce reality to a point of time, and to abstract, from the depth of a multiplicity of experiences, a pure verbal act. . . . It presupposes a world which is constructed, elaborated, self-sufficient, reduced to significant lines, and not one which has been sent sprawling before us, for us to take or leave. Behind the preterite there always lurks a demiurge, a God, or a reciter.

Can you get any more intelligent than this?

Logic: The mind can't entertain two ideas at once, wrote Descartes, because the pineal gland can't be in two places at the same time. *C'n'est pas logique*. Boileau's "Twelfth Satire" equated ambiguity and equivocation long before Larousse. Reason was the Goddess the Revolution installed in Notre Dame. In the French words of the *Internationale* it's Reason that announces the final conflict. It's Justice in the English version. Experiential versus cognitive, empirical versus rational.

Neologism: Professor Picard accused him of jargon. He loved neologisms: they too were insignia of liberty. Against *Doxa*, paradox; against stereotypes, "novation": escape from the limits of authorized French. Playing with roots. With Greek ("holophrase," "semiophysis," "semioclasty"). The petty bourgeois can't do it; their Larousse, unlike English dictionaries, gives no derivations. You have to go to Littré, Robert; derivations are the privilege of the educated, the signifiers of (don't say it) power.

Object: He believes in it, repudiates abstraction. Yet *il n'y a pas de hors-texte*. There being no outside to the text, the object is hard to get at. The text is our universe, and we live inside it like the Shropshire Lad, in a world we never made. But what for Derrida is a philosophical position is for Barthes the actuality of experience. He really does live in a universe of signs. It's not surprising that he wants us to join him there; language, he says somewhere, was his Nature. He likes to quote vivid descriptions; it's the physicality of objects that he admires in Michelet. Yet his own language rarely evokes direct physical experience. The scarf the lover of *A Lover's Discourse* selects for his beloved

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is merely a sign; we are not told its texture or color. What RB describes, so well that we examine them as never before, are not objects but texts, written but also visual, stills from *Ivan the Terrible*, the plates of the *Grande Encyclopédie*: signifying phrases of the world's language. Texts were for him Nature, took the place of the conventional Nature which excluded him and which he repudiated as one more of the masks of *clarté*. Language he can describe incomparably, the nuance of its structures, the susurrus of its words. It is the rustle of language that he hears, not the rustle of Julia's silks, or anybody else's. Vendler doubts, in the course of her fine appreciation, that he was interested enough in people to write the novel he intended, and indeed, even in the clearly personal *A Lover's Discourse* the beloved X seems as abstract as his designation. Through abstraction the brilliant intelligence can at once confess its pain and hold it at an ironic distance. So the examples are far more often taken from literature than from life: Proust, Goethe. When we do get a signifying object, the blue coat and yellow vest belong to Werther.

Obscurity: *RB by RB*: "He realizes then how obscure such statements, clear as they are to him, must be for many others." Language obscure enough, elliptical enough, must in its "dreadful freedom" sacrifice fraternity and equality to liberty. The reader is continually being tested: are you intelligent enough? Industrious enough? Not what RB envisaged in 1963 when he rejected an academic ideology "articulated around a technique difficult enough to constitute an instrument of selection," in favor of an "immanent criticism" which required, "in the work's presence, only a power of astonishment." Obscurity becomes protective clothing, thick enough, all too often, to convert what might otherwise be productive challenge into dismissible peevishness: that wasn't Barthes's intention, who claimed, growing older, "no power, a little knowledge, a little wisdom, and as much flavor as possible." The author's work escapes him; he told us that. And the academy does not deal in astonishment; he told us that too.

Power: Why so much when he claimed none? The young thrill, perhaps, of putting everything at risk, safe in the suspicion that everything deconstructed will come together again by pure bourgeois inertia?

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Plural: Central to his lexicon, the word evokes the consistency of a life. Invoking *La Déesse Homosexualité* ("all she permits to say, to do, to understand, to know"), he would speak of "cruising," in reading too. That too was liberty.

Received ideas: he had his own. Marxism afforded them; so did psychoanalysis. *Self-evident*, they *followed of themselves*.

Responsibility: "What we can ask of a writer is that he be responsible"—but not for his opinions, and not to truth, to which he "loses all claim." Yet Barthes continues: a writer's "true responsibility" is to "literature . . . as a Mosaic glance at the Promised Land of the real." For him, as for Orwell, writing was an ethical enterprise. But where Orwell warred against the abstraction that obfuscates the appalling cruelty of the actualities it is our duty to see feelingly, Barthes felt the characteristic French responsibility, not first to the real, but to language. Still, though you can desire the escape from meaning, try for it, you can't accomplish it. Language foils you, stubbornly referential. The reader foils you, always looking for a meaning, not really satisfied to think he's free to find his own, wanting at least to approximate yours. And saying the same thing over a lifetime's *écriture*, you foil yourself. You thought it was true, and necessary to be said. Which brings us back to responsibility—the old-fashioned kind.

Truth: "Literature has an effect of truth much more violent for me than that of religion." A sentence from his journal, his last published work; he had been reading of the death of old Prince Bolkonsky in *War and Peace* while his own mother was dying. Cagy still: an *effect*. Yet somehow *truth* made its way into the sentence. When push comes to shove, it's the Promised Land that seems real.

(Hand)Writing: Introducing *RB by RB*: "All this must be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel." Cagy again; hide-and-seek, RB's discreet charm. Yet he arranged for the words to appear not in print but in his own fine rapid cursive, most personal of signatures. On another page, notes made in bed show handwriting loosened but still his own. Of course he didn't type.

Zed: He called it "The letter of deviance" and made it his own. First the straight line of assertion, then the zigzag of "reversal, contradiction, reactive energy"; *but, on the other hand,*

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yet. In the end of *Mythologies*, for instance: one demystifies the bourgeois myth of "good French wine"—but thereby regretfully "cut[s] oneself off from those who are . . . warmed" by what is in fact good, condemned, however progressive one's politics, to a sociality one's intelligence must render merely theoretical. So too the Author zigzags back in *The Pleasure of the Text*; though "as an institution" he's dead, yet "lost in the midst of the text (not *behind* it, like a god from the machine) there's always the other, the author." For (emphasis again his) "*I desire* the author"—"*d'une certaine façon*."

When the Author died in France in 1968 it seemed a local matter. But as the report spread and discipline after discipline faced the demands of grand theory, the game turns serious. The insouciant critic gives way to the sober philosopher; people get nervous. In 1989 the lead article in the journal of the American Historical Association called "authorial presence" a "dream"; invoked Barthes, and after him Foucault and Derrida; worried whether, the author absent, intellectual history could be written at all. The simplicity of the answer may perhaps startle; the writer confesses that "it is beginning to look as if *belief* in the author may be our best response" (italics his). "Writers from a variety of disciplines are now suggesting that, if we hope to make sense of any text, we must first attribute to it an author." He had to read an awful lot to get to that point; my grandmother called it going round your elbow to get to your thumb. Perhaps, after the years in the wilderness, the professors are again turning their eyes toward the Promised Land, joining the Common Reader, to whose common sense Dr. Johnson trusted because it was "uncorrupted with literary prejudices," "the refinements of subtilty," or "the dogmatism of learning."

"Of all the intellectual notables who have emerged since World War II in France," writes Susan Sontag, "Roland Barthes is the one whose work I am most certain will endure." If so, it is because he is the one whose writing can be read, at least intermittently, for pleasure. Pleasure of the text and pleasure of the author, no god and no authority, but a human being to be enjoyed, for his commitment to freedom, to multiplicity, and to delight, for his intelligence, and for the generosity of his intentions. He desired the author. So do we.

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DEAN ALBARELLI

Cheaters

If it kept up he'd have to cancel lunch with Mackenzie, the old Canadian lawyer. Brendan couldn't tell for sure yet, but sitting hunched over his desk, sifting through an unlikely accident report from Aetna, he recognized a familiar blossom of pain in his lower abdomen. One thing he knew by now, if he was about to go into labor with a kidney stone, he wanted to be home in bed. Not sitting across from Mackenzie in some restaurant, or driving frantically across town, and not gasping on the little sofa here in his office, but in bed, with the door shut against his wife and daughters so he could moan and thrash with dignity.

He'd already passed three painful stones, the first about ten years ago, at twenty-seven. He'd been a little bit awed by the fact that each had occurred immediately after an affair. To anyone else it might not seem like such a coincidence, but after the third round of urinating blood in the wake of great infidelities, he was half convinced there was more than an excess of calcium causing his intestinal grief. As if guilt alone wasn't enough, his body had worked out its own private penance for him.

Still, he'd been on the fidelity wagon for more than two years now. Since the thing with Poppie Hansen, he'd hardly looked at another woman. Somewhere between kidney and conscience, important signals had been crossed. He pulled the black desk phone nearer, and could feel the pain building slightly, though it hadn't moved at all. Kneading delicately at his right side, he dialed Martin Mackenzie's office to cancel their lunch, but the old Canuck was not in. The secretary asked if there was a message, and Brendan told her his daughter was sick at school, that he had to pick her up right away. Somehow he didn't think a young p.i. hobbled with kidney stones sounded especially promising, particularly to an old health nut like Mackenzie.

He pushed the phone away and watched helplessly as it

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nudged a yellow legal pad off the other edge of the desk. The pain still hadn't shifted, it just grew more intense, and he began to wonder if it might be his appendix. That wasn't the sort of thing you could sit around and wait to pass. If the pain only moved towards his groin he'd know, but he also knew that was when it turned nasty. Pushing lightly off the desk with his weight on his knees, he rose gingerly, shuffling over to the coat rack. But after pulling his jacket on he slumped back down at his desk, breathing heavily and trying to remember just what side the goddamned appendix was supposed to be on.

A jingle sounded from the old strap of sleigh bells attached to the outer office door. Not Mackenzie he hoped. He leaned over his desk to peer out, causing his side to throb with increased intensity. A tall rugged-looking guy about his own age, in corduroys and a worn suede sports coat, stood with one hand still on the doorknob. "Uh, Brendan Kellogg?"

"Yes!" He rubbed gently at his stomach beneath the desk. "Sorry, but I was just on my way out—I've got kind of an emergency."

"Oh. Oh, no problem. You be in tomorrow?" The man had advanced as far as the doorway connecting the tiny outer office, and stood scratching at his shirt with a single silver car key. He was a good-looking guy, big, with a short growth of greying beard.

Brendan stood up, grunting lightly with the effort. "Yeah, if you could come in a little earlier tomorrow morning?"

"I c-c-c-can't make it tomorrow morning," the man said, squinting his eyes tightly on the stuttered word.

Brendan peered more closely at the face. Something about him, the stutter, or the green eyes behind wire-rimmed glasses, was vaguely familiar. One of the many half-remembered faces from high school maybe. "Well, if you'd like to leave your name and set up a time tomorrow afternoon. I'll be back by three." He was breathing through his nose now, trying to suppress involuntary groans as he spoke.

"Sure, sometime around three'd be good," the man said, nodding slightly.

Brendan sat down again and reached for his pen. "And you're Mr. . . . ?"

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"Dan Truax." He stepped closer and extended his hand, the back of his fingers stained with varnish or brown paint.

"Truax," Brendan said aloud, jotting the name. Yes, Truax, that was it. Junior year of high school, the end of baseball season. The rawhide webbing on Brendan's old first baseman's glove had begun to fray. A throw from the shortstop finally tore half the pocket right out of the glove, though he'd somehow managed to hold on to the ball. They were playing Winooski that day, and Truax was Winooski's first baseman, the only other lefty on either team. When it became obvious in the game's delay that no one on Brendan's team had a glove he could use, this Truax, bearded now, had come half jogging from his team's dugout chewing a fat wad of bubble gum. "Here you go," he'd said, tossing the glove from several yards away. "You c-c-can leave it on the bag after." It was a fine new glove, a Wilson, with the name TRUAX neatly engraved on the long thumb with a wood-burning pen.

At the top of the final inning, with two out and a mouthy kid from Winooski on first, Truax had come to bat. He swung at the first pitch and hit a high pop-up that soared straight above his team's on-deck circle. Brendan lurched forward, then side-stepped and back-pedalled as the wind carried the ball behind him, Brendan finally bouncing against the visiting team's dugout screen and snagging the ball at shoulder height. There were shouts of "Ingrate!" and "Try that one with your own glove!" from some of the Winooski players behind the screen. Truax came walking over to first, actually smiling, and said, "Nice c-c-catch" as Brendan handed him the glove. It was the most gracious gesture Brendan could imagine, though all he could think to say was, "Yeah, sorry. Nice glove."

Should he remind Truax of that? Better to wait. The pain in his side had let up slightly, but he knew it could start in again any minute. "And what was it you wanted to see me about?"

"Well . . . I understand you do surveillance work. . . ." His cheeks, above the beard, were reddening.

Brendan could already guess. "Yeah, I do *some* surveillance work."

"I don't know if you take this sort of job or not, but uh, it's, it'd be my wife." He made a slight shrugging gesture.

Brendan nodded and said, "Uh-huh," waiting for him to go

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on, trying to affect the sort of indifference that would tell Truax he wasn't being laughed at as a cuckold, that this was not an uncommon request. He was glad now that he hadn't mentioned the glove incident. A man in Truax's position wasn't looking for recognition.

"You suspect that she's . . . ?"

"Having an affair," Truax said quickly, not quite looking Brendan in the eye.

"Yeah, I see." He gestured Truax to a chair. "Uh, I don't really take that kind of case these days. Since '82 the state's had no-fault divorce legislation, so if that's what's in the picture, my services aren't even needed. You don't have to *prove* anything for a divorce."

Truax was unmoved. He sat patiently shaking his head. "That's not what I'm after. I don't want a divorce." He paused, glancing at a pigeon settling on the window ledge outside. "It's just that something's g-g-go-go-going on, and I want to know." His big stained hands were set in his lap, and he clicked the car key against his thumbnail, waiting for Brendan to speak.

"Have you confronted her with, uh, your suspicions?"

"Yes, but of c-c-c—" And here he stopped. Sitting in the chair, he raised his left hand to shoulder height, index finger extended, almost pointing at Brendan. He smiled faintly, apologetically, and slowly lowered his hand about six inches, drawing it across in front of himself in an L shape. ". . . course she denies it," he said in a calm expulsion of breath. Then, "Sorry, it's part of the therapy for my stutter."

Brendan nodded.

"She denies it, but I wouldn't have c-c-c—I wouldn't want to hire you unless I thought there was something there. Look. I'm not gonna go out and shoot anybody. I'm not gonna beat my wife up if it turns out I'm right. It's just, I just c-c-"—again the L in mid-air, a sort of half blessing—"can't . . . con-cen-trate on my work these days," he said with great effort. Almost whispering he added, "I need to know." He stopped and stared at Brendan, his lips folding into a scowl. "The signs are all there, you know? I mean, suddenly all these long lunches and nights out with girlfriends that I c-c-can never really verify, all that, but little things, too. Stuff a husband can tell. Brushing her teeth eight times a day, always shaving her *legs* these days, you

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know? She even seems to dress a whole lot more self-c-c-c-"—the index finger—"con-scious-ly," he said slowly. "It's not like a woman who's been married ten years. Not the one I've been married to anyway. I know something's going on."

"I'll tell you," Brendan said. "I've got this emergency I've gotta head out for right now. Think about it tonight. If you still want me tomorrow, I'll meet you here at three and we can go over things."

Truax stood and solemnly extended his big hand again. "I'll see you tomorrow then."

From the window, Brendan watched him leave and then rushed out to his own car. The pain had moved forward and down now, and he drove straight for home, running several red lights. The urologist had told him that when the pain began he should drink water and stand erect as much as he could to facilitate the stone's quick passage. Stand erect. That was what got him this way the other times, it seemed. "If you can," the urologist had said, "you should even go jogging." The man clearly had never passed a kidney stone.

At home Brendan stood in the kitchen drinking water, groaning his way from room to room as long as he could, until finally the pain was too much and he got into bed. Rachel wasn't home, probably tutoring at the grade school. Beth and Addie would be in school still, too. He pulled a pillow over his face and couldn't help picturing the jagged brown bitch of a stone tearing away at the soft narrow tissue leading to his bladder. It had to be a big one. After a while he hobbled into the bathroom and took a Percodan left over from Rachel's ear infection, but the pain persisted on and off for over an hour. When it finally stopped, he fell into the sort of exhausted, sweaty sleep of release that he associated with spent sexual energy.

The next morning, standing at the toilet with a paper cup, he watched a tiny, reddish brown calculus, the size of four or five grains of beach sand, float into his urine. "Little fucker," he said, and washed it off before sealing it into an envelope.

Truax would be back in the afternoon, and though Brendan had already turned down a dozen similar jobs, he would agree to take this one on. There was only one other licensed investigator in town, a less than reputable character, which meant

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Brendan could rely on enough retainers from law firms and industries without having to take on what he called "motel work." The independence was a distinct improvement over his days as a police detective—his income was better, too—but it could be dull labor at times. He'd taken on two or three truly "private" cases in the past, jobs that had been interesting in a gossipy sort of way; but usually he was just hustling around the county interviewing witnesses for upcoming court cases, running checks on car accidents, gun registrations, character references, writing up piddly reports for the boys in three-piece suits.

Checking Truax's wife out to see if she was really getting it on with someone might actually be a welcome diversion. And aside from that, he'd have a hard time saying no to the former first baseman.

Truax was there at three-fifteen the next day; he was prepared to spend what it took. Brendan got out a yellow legal pad and suggested they make a schedule of Liz Truax's activities. He tried to sound casual, but already there was something unpleasant and inappropriate about the business that made him feel awkward.

Truax and his wife ran a furniture building business, a fairly prosperous one Brendan remembered having seen in a cluster of new shops across from the old Maltex factory. Liz Truax kept books and assisted in the shop three mornings a week. She swam at the Y most Tuesday afternoons, was active in the League of Women Voters, which met about once every two weeks now, and took an art history class at the university on Monday and Wednesday afternoons. Otherwise, Truax said, at least three afternoons a week and most Saturdays she was on her own, either home, downtown, at the library, or visiting with friends. She had a friend named Paula whom Truax suspected was sometimes prepared to cover for his wife. They didn't have any children.

After putting it off for several days, Brendan decided on Monday—*First Day of Spring*, his calendar said—to start dusting Liz Truax. He'd never seen her in person, but her husband had provided two recent photographs.

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The art history lecture theatre was in the basement of the university museum. Brendan wandered through the collection upstairs until students began to arrive. Picking Liz Truax out was easier than he'd expected. In the corridor downstairs, she stood in the midst of a flock of undergraduates, a tall, chestnut-haired woman, somewhere around thirty-five, a bit heavy in the legs maybe. Less stunning than the two color snapshots indicated, but attractive nonetheless. Even surrounded by nineteen- and twenty-year-olds, she didn't look exactly out of place. She wore blue jeans and a handsome leather jacket, and stood by herself while students from the previous lecture filed out of the theatre.

In a few minutes the corridor had emptied out in a mass exchange of backpacks coming and going; Brendan read notices by the bulletin board and peeled open a package of Certs. A moment later a short handsome man wearing pointy cowboy boots with jeans and a drawstring tie came trotting down the stairs. He carried a leather briefcase, and in his other hand a carousel of picture slides. He nodded curtly at Brendan, slowed at the double doors and tucked the slides under his briefcase arm, then quickly combed his hair with his fingers. When he swung the door open, Brendan tried to get a glimpse inside, but there was no telling where Liz Truax sat. He grabbed the door before it swung completely closed and held it open a few inches. The professor character had stopped at one of the aisle seats, setting his slides on the wide cement step while he spoke with someone. He balanced the briefcase on one leg, opened it and withdrew a magazine, which he handed to Liz Truax. Then he hurried down to the front of the room.

If nothing else, the little guy was certainly a candidate, though Brendan half hoped he wasn't going to solve things so quickly.

He walked up to the student union and, with a view of the museum's exit doors, sat sipping coffee in the dimly lit snack bar, adolescently amazed at the number of perfect female bodies gathered in one room. A few girls glanced interestedly at him, but he couldn't get over feeling irreparably aged and out of place. He'd done two years at this same school in the late sixties, until one impoverished summer he took an exam that got him a scholarship to the Police Academy in Plattsburgh.

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Since then he hadn't set foot in any of these buildings. Occasionally he regretted not going back to finish his degree, but right now it was the sheer sexuality of the place that made him half mourn all he'd missed, even though his last affair had left him leery of anything outside his marriage.

Liz Truax emerged from the museum an hour later. Wyatt Earp was a few yards behind her, but she seemed to be walking alone, he flanked by two other students. Brendan followed her across the campus to the library parking lot and watched her stop at the passenger door of a green Volvo. She removed a stack of books from the front seat and started across the sidewalk towards the fine arts library. It was a small two-story building Brendan had never been in, and he sat on the railing outside the dairy bar for about half an hour until she came out empty-handed, heading back toward the Volvo. His own car was in a lot behind the theatre. He jumped off the short ledge beneath the railing and sprinted across the wet grass and melting snow beside the main library, almost losing one of his shoes in the muddy suck of the earth there, trying to keep Liz Truax's departing car in sight.

He finally caught up with her at a light beyond the mall on Route 7. There were two other cars between them, and he kept it that way for another mile, though he knew he couldn't expect much now; the development Truax had given as their address was just off the main road ahead, and her directional light had come on. He followed at a distance for another half mile until she turned into the driveway of a big modern freestyle house, natural wood with lots of angles and windows overlooking the lake.

He parked down the street for ten minutes in case she came back out, then tuned the radio to an old Supremes song and headed back to the office.

Unless Truax called with some spontaneous information likely to produce results, there was nothing on his wife's schedule worth pursuing until her Tuesday afternoon swim. Brendan went to the Y after lunch on Tuesday, and from the observation window near the squash courts watched her crawl and backstroke steady sets of laps for almost forty-five minutes, still unaccompanied, occasionally chatting casually with men

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and women she seemed to know. In a bathing suit her legs were more shapely than he'd guessed from seeing her in blue jeans. In fact, she was rather athletic looking—a slightly older version of the classic broad-shouldered Olympic swimmer.

From the Y he followed her downtown on foot to a number of the nicer clothing stores, venturing into one of the larger ones, but otherwise waiting outside. She didn't seem to have noticed him that first day, but he'd been stupid to stand there in the corridor as he'd done. Eventually she bought an Orange Julius and walked back to her car, then drove to Tree Spirits, "the shop," as Truax referred to it.

In his log book Brendan jotted *Swim, Downtown, Tree. 2½ hours. Wasted.*

Back at the office he washed his face and hands before settling down to other work.

Wednesday he followed her from the time she left the shop, just before noon. She met two other women downtown for lunch, but her routine was the same as Monday's, stopping at the fine arts library after class, coming out empty-handed and alone, driving straight home.

Her days were as dull as Brendan's own. Perhaps Truax was simply paranoid. Still, after ten years of living with the woman, it was likely enough the guy could sense something unusual in the works. Maybe the lover was out of town this week. A business trip. Maybe Brendan wasn't tagging her at the right times, although Truax was supposed to call, even at Brendan's home, if she went out at night, or under dubious circumstances. Truax had to come through with something, too.

Thursday afternoon was another zero. Then Truax called to say she claimed she had a meeting that night. So Brendan followed her—to a session of the League of Women Voters.

All in all, he'd begun to feel a little slimy about the whole thing. Suppose someone had done this to *him* three years ago, when he was falling in love with Poppie? He was a professional investigator, hired in a perfectly legal capacity, but somehow he felt as if *he* were the offending party, tagging this woman all around town, carrying her photographs and a schedule of her life.

But then, couldn't some good come of it? Truax was already

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certain she was cheating on him; it wouldn't exactly be news Brendan would provide. Maybe some specific information could help save the marriage, if Truax could just approach her with the facts in hand. There was that side to it, after all. He was doing this decent guy Truax a favor, wasn't he?

But what good would it really do? And what kind of favor was that, charging the guy thirty dollars an hour to tell him he's a cuckold? A c-c-c-cuckold. Fuck it. He was better off running errands for some douche-bag lawyer.

For the rest of the week he let up on Liz Truax, deciding he'd be doing himself and Truax both a favor if he waited until the man could give him something more concrete. He spent the next three days pursuing a list of leads and interviews for Mackenzie concerning the murder of a banker in Stowe.

But even with other distractions, in a few days his thoughts began to circle Liz Truax again. He'd followed her for nearly a week, albeit a rather lazy one, and had seen absolutely nothing noteworthy. And yet her husband seemed so certain.

Thursday night, after Brendan and Rachel had put the girls to bed, he opened a beer and sat down in the living room, rubbing the smooth side of the bottle against his cheek, wondering if maybe it was the little cowboy art professor after all. He heard Rachel's newspaper close across the room and could feel her eyes weighing on him. "What's up, anyway?" she asked. There was a vaguely accusatory tone to her question that hinted as much of suspicion as of sympathetic concern. When he glanced up, the set of her mouth confirmed it; not so much accusation, perhaps, but a defensive preparedness for the worst.

Less than three years ago he'd moved out, when Beth was seven and Addie was five. He'd had two short and superficial affairs early in their marriage, which Rachel never knew about, but the summer she and the girls had flown out to visit her parents in Minnesota, he'd ventured into deeper waters. It was the year Brendan had been elected to the board of aldermen from his ward, pursuing, practically on a whim, a latent political interest.

As an alderman he'd discovered a previously unrealized ability to speak spontaneously and persuasively before large

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groups. Eventually he was spearheading a drive to prevent construction of a wood-chip power plant on the city's waterfront. Local reporters were calling the house and often stopped him as he left City Hall on Wednesday nights. One of them was a twenty-six-year-old girl named Poppie Hansen, polite and pretty in a plainish way, with an accent that wasn't quite British but was somehow more formal than American. It was because of her that Brendan had moved out of the house that September, after Rachel and the girls had returned from Minnesota. The three months he'd spent in an apartment of his own were gradually seeming to become some other life he and Rachel had lived, and occasionally she could even half joke about it now; but he also knew that her dreams were still haunted by those days, even though Poppie had long since moved away.

"What's up, anyway?" Rachel asked.

He smiled briefly and flipped his bottle cap like a coin in her direction. "Nothing, sorry, just tired." He waited for her to return the smile. She still had what Brendan had always admired as typically Midwestern beauty, especially with her wheat-colored hair drawn back in a ponytail, as it was now. Her eyes were beginning to reveal some faint creases—each of which she claimed dated back exactly two-and-a-half years. Maybe she was right. His own dark eyebrows had each sprouted several long white hairs at about the same time. Bodies told stories after all.

She was still holding the same straight face, watching him.

Banjo, the cat, wandered into the room and rubbed against Rachel's leg until she received him into her lap, stroking the full length of his spine as he settled. "Did you get a letter or something?"

"No, no letter. It's just a new case. Something's got me stumped."

"Phone call?"

"Rachel, we're not going to hear from her anymore. Jesus, I thought you'd stopped with that. I wish you'd finally forget it."

"I wish it had never happened."

"Well so do I." But that wasn't quite true. Sometimes it seemed almost true, but never completely. As much as he loved Rachel, and regretted hurting her, he also regretted at times the fact that he would never know a life with Poppie.

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"So what's this new case?"

"I'm not even sure it's anything really. Just some guy."

"Oh, well don't bore me with all the details."

"Sorry, I'm just not sure it's even worth talking about." He didn't want Rachel to think he was getting into slime work, kicking down motel room doors with a Nikon handy. And aside from that he just didn't have the energy to tell her the whole story right now. There wasn't much to say, and yet trying to express everything there *was* to say about Truax was more than he felt up to. That was getting to be a familiar feeling, that sort of lethargy of the mouth. He and Rachel had always communicated pretty well, but in the last five years or so he'd certainly backed off; there was a lot he just didn't bother to share anymore. Maybe especially since that crazy September. And there were certain details of his days, even now, with Poppie back in Washington, or in her parents' hometown in Wales, or God knew where, which he felt a desire to share with her alone: the gems and tidbits and minor triumphs of his job, for example; the artistic talent Bethany was beginning to show, sketching Brendan's face with great accuracy while he slept on the couch; or something funny Addie might say, sitting on his lap and munching Saltines.

He flicked his thumb in the mouth of the beer bottle and made a careless *thock* sound. "It's a guy I remember from high school. He didn't recognize me, though. He played baseball for Winooski." He sighed, and shrugged. "He was really desperate, he thinks his wife's running around, and I agreed to do some . . . 'surveillance' work for him. And now I kind of regret it, even though nothing's turning up."

Rachel had never liked him taking on the domestic jobs that came his way. She respected his work, was genuinely interested in it, but she thought most domestic jobs should be left to the parties involved. It was an issue she could be more than a little emphatic about. So he was grateful for the fact that she only nodded now, even looked sympathetic, when she might have frowned and compounded his unhappiness.

"See, it's nothing for you to worry about," he said.

"Well, I doubt I'm ever going to stop worrying, so don't get your hopes up." She paused. "Anyway, I'm sorry to be such a nag, but the other—oh, never mind."

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"The other what? The other day something happened? What?"

"Nothing, forget it."

"I want to know. What happened the other day? A letter came?"

"No, it's stupid, nothing."

"The phone rang and somebody hung up?"

"No."

"Well tell me!"

"Okay. The other day I saw this tall girl downtown who I thought for a minute looked just like that little bitch, not that I ever got a very good look at her. This girl was kind of thin, though. What's her name wasn't very thin, was she?"

It was a rhetorical question; Rachel knew perfectly well that Poppie was a big woman, though she wasn't at all overweight. He knew Rachel wanted him to say, "No, she wasn't thin, she was a big fat ugly bitch," but he wouldn't say it, even as a lie to soothe Rachel's battered loyalty. "Rachel," he said, "she went off to Washington, or Wales or someplace, and I'm sure she went for good, so you don't have to keep carrying that cross. Jesus, it's been almost three years." He rubbed an itchy spot on his wrist against the stubble on his chin. "I know it was foolish, it was mean, but I wouldn't make that mistake again. Christ, I regret it as much as you do."

She tilted her head and treated him to an expression of extreme skepticism, which he knew he had coming. "I'm just glad you care about Beth and Addie as much as you do, or I doubt we'd have seen you again." She dropped a clump of Banjo's loose fur to the floor.

"Rachel, that's really unfair. I don't know why I can't convince you."

"Because I know what's true. I wish you could convince me, but I think I know what's true. I know you love me. I just think I know other things, too."

She still maintained that if it hadn't been for the girls, and for her own reports of the way Bethany would cry seeing his empty chair at dinner every night, he would never have returned at all. But reluctant as he had been to break off with Poppie, he knew Rachel was wrong. Nights in Poppie's little apartment on Buell Street, her big varnished easel gathering dust and dom-

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inating a corner of the living room like an abandoned teepee frame, the two of them had agonized over his waverings and final decision. By the time it came he knew he'd have returned to Rachel even if they'd been childless. Their lives were that inextricably bound up after fourteen years. He couldn't escape Rachel, and, even for the wonder of Poppie Hansen, didn't want to when all was said and done.

But Rachel wouldn't be convinced. Or maybe her failing to be convinced was just a tactic she'd opted for, so that he'd be forever proving himself to her now. Either way, it didn't matter. They were together, and she'd found it within herself to summon a forgiveness he could never have located in his own love.

He made a disappointed *dit* sound with his tongue and drained the rest of his beer, the bottle making a little bird whistle noise as it emptied.

Rachel watched him, stroking Banjo's forehead. "So what are you going to do about your baseball player?"

"I don't know. Call him tomorrow and tell him there's nothing to worry about, I guess." He stood up and crossed the room. "Everybody's so goddamn suspicious." He rubbed at the cat's smooth forepaw. "You know?"

Friday evening Rachel had asked him to pick up Beth and Addie after their dance lesson. He'd come close to calling Truax a few hours earlier to say the whole thing was seeming pointless and maybe they should call it off. But then he remembered that Liz Truax was supposed to be in the shop on busy Friday afternoons, and he didn't want to make things any more awkward for Dan.

He sat in the car outside the dance studio and toyed with the radio until he could see Beth and Addie come pushing out the heavy glass doors, chattering earnestly about Addie's awkward arabesques, or how Mona, the instructor, must have permanent PMS she's so grouchy, or why did Sharon Seaver even bother to keep taking, she was such a space cadet—never paid attention and had all the coordination of a broomstick.

Beth took a quick stride ahead of Addie to claim the front seat, her silver cross bouncing on a thin chain at her neck. "Hi, Daddy, sorry if you had to wait for us." Their cheeks were

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flushed, and wispy brown curls had formed about Addie's round forehead.

"Nope, just got here," he said. "Good lesson?"

"It was okay. Addie's real sore. Mona *worked* us today. Her boyfriend was there. I think she was showing off for him."

"Is *that* why we kept doing those things?" Addie asked. She pulled her ponytail around to the front and untied the pink ribbon she wore strictly for dance classes, slumping tiredly in the back seat. Aside from being two years younger, she seemed to have less endurance than Bethany, was less sleekly athletic. Brendan figured it was just baby fat, but it sometimes added to his worries that Addie was going to be forever frustrated trying to emulate her older sister's graceful successes through life.

They drew up to the traffic light in front of the police station and he glanced up at his old office window. He didn't know who sat there these days, although he still kept in touch with former colleagues. Marcie, at the information desk, had a stack of his cards in her drawer, and occasionally directed potential clients his way. He'd have to stop by with Beth and Addie someday and show them off.

Bethany was hunched over now, rooting through the Capezio bag at her feet, and finally drew out a red plastic hairbrush. She pulled down the mirrored sun visor and began brushing out her hair, a little tip of red tongue curled at the corner of her mouth in concentration.

Addie loosened her seat belt, leaned forward from the back seat and said, "Daddy, do you believe Bethy dreams cartoons?"

"What?"

"I do," Bethany said. "Dad'll tell you. I dream cartoons all the time."

"Bethy says she dreams cartoons at night. I never dream cartoons. Do you think she really dreams cartoons?"

He looked at Addie in the rearview mirror. "Yeah, I think she does," he said, "but they're only in black and white. She can't get color."

"Nuh-uh," Beth said, shaking her head quickly, but Brendan winked and she stopped, smiling knowingly at him over their private understanding.

He hoped Addie hadn't noticed the wink. He looked in the rearview mirror again and told her he thought she was looking

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a lot thinner with all this dancing. "I oughta be," she said sluggishly, and he laughed, glancing up at the light and just then noticing the Volvo—Liz Truax's green Volvo. It pulled up to the intersection opposite them, came to a stop, and abruptly turned left on the advance signal. But in the front seat with Liz Truax, laughing and raising something, an apple, to her mouth . . . Poppie? His heart took off, and his hands were damp on the steering wheel. He leaned over the dashboard and quickly flipped Beth's sun visor up to get a better look.

"What's wrong, Dad?"

"Nothing. Just thought I saw someone." He could only see the back of their heads now. If it was Poppie, she hadn't noticed him; he'd only managed the briefest glance, but he was almost certain it was she. After two years he was, at any rate, well past the point of mistaking every woman who looked remotely like her for being the real thing. Maybe Rachel *had* seen her the other day. And then he realized it had to be Poppie, that Truax had practically told him so when he'd said his wife had a friend named Paula . . . god*damn*it! What the fuck kind of investigator had he dwindled into, anyway? Truax had said Paula, plain English, Paula, and Brendan hadn't even bothered to ask "Paula who?" Just when he'd managed to stop howling at his own private moon every time he heard the names Paula, or Poppie, or Cardiff, Wales, someone referred to the only Paula he knew in the world and he missed the connection completely.

The Volvo was out of sight now; Addie was tapping his shoulder from the back seat. "We've got the go, Dad. Dad, we've got the go."

The light was green. He was tempted to follow them, but they were too far away now. Besides, the girls were with him, and what the hell would he do if he caught the car? If Poppie was in town he'd find her soon enough. That couldn't be too great a problem, even for the incompetent slouch he'd apparently become. But the coincidence of her knowing Liz Truax was unsettling. As he drove home, his momentary glimpse of the two of them hung there just beyond his windshield like some morsel of meaning he couldn't comprehend. Or was he investing the coincidence with more than it deserved? Maybe coincidence itself was the only lesson here.

He still had to pick up ice cream, and then collect Beth's

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friend Lisa, whose parents were in the middle of an ugly divorce and had asked if she could spend the night; but when he got home he checked the phone book for a listing. Nothing. He closed the door to the den and dialed information while Rachel prepared dinner. Yes, they did have a listing for Paula Hansen, and an address at 24 Dodge Court, wherever that was. He asked the operator if she could tell him how long the number had been in service, but she couldn't say for sure.

He sat restlessly through dinner, and afterwards asked Rachel if she'd mind his going out to take care of some things.

"Is this still about your suspicious baseball player?"

"No, no, it's something for Mackenzie. I'll tell you about it later." He forced a smile and kissed her quickly on the lips, his adulterous talent for swift deception emerging dusty from the wings. Two years and more of almost total virtue, and it took only one look at Poppie Hansen to set him off lying again. Still, he felt somewhat calmer about lying now, more so than in those other reckless and deceitful times; now he wasn't concealing anything that had to be hidden with constant care. Nothing much, anyway. Not yet.

He grabbed a jacket and got into the station wagon, Rachel's car, because the Toyota was almost out of gas. He decided to swing past Truax's house first, just to see if the Volvo—and maybe Poppie—were there.

The evening had grown dark enough for headlights as he turned into Truax's neighborhood. From the end of the street he could make out the green Volvo in the driveway. There were lights on in an upstairs room, and on part of the first floor. If he waited for the last bit of light to seep behind the mountains he could Tom the ground-floor windows. He parked further down the street and sat in the car until the trees in Truax's yard were vague silhouettes.

At the split rail fence he stepped quickly up the side yard to the rock garden at the back; there was a deck spanning almost the entire rear of the house, the kitchen window shedding a small circle of light near the top of the steps. He edged across the boards, trying to control the leathery creak of his shoes, wishing he'd worn sneakers. A vibration of footsteps from inside the house, and suddenly Truax appeared in the kitchen in an untucked white shirt. He took a knife from the drawer

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and sliced something, cake, from an aluminum pan on the counter, then went back into the other room, out of sight.

Brendan edged along the deck until he came to another set of windows and another room, this one visible only in the flickering light and shadows of an unseen television. A few steps further and he could see Truax in a big easy chair, drinking from a coffee mug. Brendan stepped back down to the yard to check the upstairs windows. The second-floor light went off, and in a moment another came on in the large room where Truax sat. He crept back up the deck and saw Liz Truax standing beside Dan holding a clear plastic plant-spraying bottle. She was wearing jeans and a long Indian-style shirt that came to her knees, a maroon scarf tied around her head. She set the bottle on the floor and spoke to Truax with her hand on his shoulder. He patted her wrist and said something without looking up. Liz glanced at the television and spoke again, Truax looking up at her and nodding, and suddenly Brendan realized she was leaving. He heard the door close at the front of the house, and watched Truax jump up and dash to the kitchen telephone.

He still wanted to find Poppie, but if he followed Liz Truax now, he might finally manage what he'd been hired for. Inside, Truax stood with the phone at his ear, tapping his fingers anxiously against the wall. Brendan heard the Volvo's ignition catch and sprinted across the neighbor's backyard towards his own car.

She'd driven only a half mile south on Route 7 when he caught her. He'd never tailed her with the station wagon, so he felt less conspicuous now. She signalled a turn at the mall and drove straight across the wide parking area to the liquor store. Brendan parked in front of Sears and watched her get out, a sort of Mexican wool bag hanging from her shoulder. Through the big front window he could see her at the register buying a bottle of wine.

Ten minutes later, with just a puttering red Volkswagen between them, he watched Liz Truax hang a right onto Henry Street, an older residential neighborhood several blocks from the downtown business district. The houses here had been built early in the century, most now broken up into apartments. The Volvo's brake lights lit up, and he slowed to a stop as she backed

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into a space at the corner. She was going to get away, so he pulled into a space beside a fire hydrant and left the car at a peculiar angle several feet from the curb.

She'd already turned down a side street, a narrow cul-de-sac, he saw as he reached the corner. A hundred yards away she disappeared up the front walk of a big house with a motorcycle parked out front. He slowed to a walk now.

There were two typed labels taped to the mailbox on the front porch; the lower one read *Paula Hansen (2nd Floor)*. He stared for a moment and then touched at it.

Through the front door's low bevelled window a green carpeted stairway led to the second floor. The door was unlocked, and he quietly stepped inside, but the apartment door to the right was ajar, and a man called, "Bonnie? Is that you?"

He'd been dangling from the first fat limb of the oak tree for only a few seconds, his shoes about eight feet from the ground, wrists and forearms all scratched to hell—feeling perfectly ludicrous—when a boy carrying a motorcycle helmet and a can of beer clomped out of the house across the street. Brendan tried to slow the momentum of his swing, but the noise of his shoes scraping against bark drew the boy's attention. He stopped at the curb and looked around, then settled his gaze directly on Brendan and laughed out loud. "Howdy!" he said, then drained the beer, pulled his helmet on and straddled the bike. He revved the engine several times, looked up at Brendan again and waved, then gunned his way up the street.

In a few minutes Brendan managed to throw one leg over the limb, where he was safely obscured from anyone passing by. His wrists were rubbed raw, and he'd half destroyed his shoes. He slowly eased himself into an awkward clutch-and-straddle position, only now recalling just how much he disliked heights. A queasy, clenching feeling twisted his bowels as he stood to reach the next highest limb. The one above that, jutting out at an odd angle, poked up close to the two lighted second-floor windows.

In a few minutes he was straddling the final branch, sitting just six feet away from the kitchen window with a clear view inside: Liz Truax sat flipping through a magazine, a box of

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crayons and a glass of wine set in front of her. Across the room, Poppie stood talking on the telephone. She was prettier than he'd remembered, but her hair was much shorter, almost boyish, in one of the more tolerable New Wave styles. His breath shortened and his heart began racing again, as it had when he'd seen her in the car earlier. She'd lost a little weight, and though he wasn't sure he liked the haircut, she was still striking in some peculiarly European blend of plain and pretty. He'd half expected her to have aged in some tangible way, as his morning confrontations with the bathroom mirror constantly confirmed he had done. But Poppie looked wonderful. If anything, the haircut made her look younger, though somewhat less feminine.

As she talked, she wrote on a piece of paper taped to the wall. She was wearing an embroidered white blouse and black corduroys. After a moment, she set the pencil down and began toying with one of her earrings. It was a long flat silver piece, which he remembered, remembered taking into his mouth once while she had worn it, lying in an apartment not far from here. He said her name quietly to himself and shifted on the branch.

Liz Truax set her glass down and carried the magazine into another room. What was the connection here?

The wind let up, and edging closer to the window he could catch now and then the familiar, polite notes of Poppie's voice, though he couldn't make out what she was saying. "Don't worry"? "Don't hurry"? A few other sentences, mostly unclear, and then, "Bye-bye, Louise," and something in Welsh. Louise. Her older sister. She set the phone down and sat at the head of the table, facing almost directly out at Brendan as she toyed with the cork from the wine bottle. She filled her glass, leaned her head back against the chair and closed her eyes. He could hear Liz Truax calling out from another room of the apartment, and Poppie said loudly, with her eyes still closed, "Yes, next month she believes." She opened her eyes for a moment, hunched her shoulders and covered a yawn, slumping deeper into the chair. Watching the creamy skin of her throat, he thought of the first time they had slept together—Poppie, amazingly, still a virgin at age twenty-six—how innocently surprised and yet pleased she had been when he'd come onto

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her soft white belly. Without taking her lips from his, her fingers had gently, almost tentatively, explored his semen shot across her stomach, and then she had clasped him to her gratefully, as if he had presented some cherished and unexpected gift.

Liz Truax returned from the other room adjusting the long tail of her shirt. She stopped behind Poppie's chair and placed her hands over Poppie's eyes, like Addie did when she wanted to take Brendan by surprise. Now she slid her thumbs over Poppie's eyelids, Poppie smiling and tilting her head back, reaching up and linking her hands around the other woman's neck. He gripped at the limb beneath him and watched Liz Truax bend over and kiss Poppie's forehead. His breaths came short now, as if one lung had stopped functioning. Poppie reached for the glass of wine and brought it to her mouth, then to the smiling mouth above her. Still standing, Liz Truax sipped at the glass and slid her hand into the top of Poppie's blouse and beneath her bra. She was caressing Poppie's breast with her open hand, kneading lightly at it until she finally took Poppie's wrists and pulled her to her feet, drawing her to another room.

Brendan shinned backwards on the limb until he could lean against the tree's rough trunk.

From a nearby branch an unseen owl moaned a solemn "wooing" sound.

The bedroom light was on at home, but he didn't feel like facing Rachel: he parked quietly and went for a long walk up the street, the smell of spring mud in the air, a few crickets shreeping out a song. Then back down the street and across the playing fields of the middle school. He let himself in through the garage door and sat in the den with a single reading lamp on. Rachel came in in her flannel nightgown to ask if everything was okay, and he said yes, that he just wanted to catch the news and get a little more tired before coming to bed.

"Dan Truax called for you a couple of hours ago," she said. "Is that the baseball player?"

"Uh-huh."

She turned the television on for him and switched it to the

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twenty-four-hour news channel. "Come to bed soon," she said. She stopped by the doorway. "Okay?"

"Uh-huh, soon," he said, and smiled at her, grateful for the routine, and security, and sane and steady love in their lives.

"You won't fall asleep out here?"

"No, I'll be in soon."

Rachel made a kissing sound and padded barefoot back to bed, her skinny shape barely revealed beneath the nightgown.

He wasn't focusing on any of the news stories, and after a while he just wanted to climb into bed with Rachel and feel the flesh and flannel warmth of her as he drifted off. He checked the back door and went upstairs to look in on Addie, who was lying on her side at the outer edge of the bed, a red wool blanket pulled over her shoulder. Banjo was stretched across the bed widthwise, taking up three fourths of the mattress between Addie and the wall. He gave Brendan an indifferent glance when he stepped into the room, then made a throaty grumbling sound as Brendan shifted him against the wall and rolled Addie onto her back.

In Beth's room there was an empty cot made up in the middle of the floor, but Beth and Lisa were cramped onto the tiny painted wood-frame bed that had once been Rachel's in Minnesota. They were half covered by a sheet, each wearing underpants and a T-shirt, one of Beth's legs slung across Lisa, who looked uncomfortable. He bent down to lift Beth over to the cot, but she woke and mumbled, "Wait, it's not ready yet."

Brendan paused, then snorted, amused. "Yes it is."

"No-o," she murmured, but then she closed her eyes again and he decided to leave her there.

Rachel was sleeping, and once in bed he scrunched up close behind her. But even as his eyes gave in to the tug of exhaustion, he could only see Poppie and Liz Truax feeding each other wine at a kitchen table.

Shaving at the bathroom mirror Saturday morning, he felt as if he'd only half wakened from a bad dream. Still, he hadn't shaken the compulsive urge to talk with Poppie, and by ten o'clock he was down on Dodge Court. She came to the door in jeans and an oversized white T-shirt, taller than he'd remembered, even though she was barefoot. She held the door in one

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hand and shook her head slightly. "I had a feeling," she said, smiling and biting her upper lip for a moment before putting her arms out and kissing him lightly on the cheek. She took his hand and said, "Don't look so put out, Brendan," drawing him inside and leading him through a simply furnished living room. In the kitchen she offered him a seat at the table by the window.

"I saw you yesterday in a car," he told her. "Kind of threw me. I didn't know where the hell you'd been. Certainly didn't think you were right here."

She touched his hand and pulled her chair in. "Only since February," she said. "I sold some paintings, so I left the paper last fall and stayed with Louise for a few months. I'd been feeling a lot better, really better I thought, and then things just got . . . grim again. So I decided . . . "—she shrugged slightly—"to come back."

"For . . .?"

"How do you mean?"

"Come back for what?"

"You," she said, as if it were obvious.

"That's why you've been here since February? For me? And I only got a look at you yesterday—as a matter of chance?"

She frowned, twisting at a loose green thread in the tablecloth. "Things didn't happen like they were supposed to. It's a little complicated."

She seemed different to him now, a little more "American" somehow. For all the familiar and tentative feminine gestures, the habit of biting her upper lip, the slight shoulder shrugs with an uncertain dip of her head, she was more sure of herself now, seemed to leave him less in control.

"How complicated?" he lifted the crystal saltshaker, rubbing his thumb along its smooth surface.

"Complicated."

"I'm all ears, Poppie." He'd never been this way with her before, mean and aloof. They'd never even had an argument, really. The only problem had ever been whether or not he'd go back to Rachel.

"You can probably guess half of it."

"You've found true love with someone else," he said a little mockingly.

Poppie sighed. "Yes, more or less." She pulled his hand from

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the saltshaker and laced her fingers with his. "Brendan, I honestly came back here to be with you. I decided, even if you won't leave Rachel, we're going to be together. I thought I'd just . . . wait for you and have you when I could. That we could be together whenever you'd manage. That was the plan, anyway."

He shifted in the chair.

"And then things happened, this other person. Out of the blue, really. I mean, it's someone I knew before, but not like this. And then I started having second thoughts about calling you, I didn't want to just be a home wrecker again. And this other thing just . . . began . . . developing." She set her hands down flat on the table, chewing her lip and staring at him. "You don't look like you believe me."

"I believe you," he said dully.

"Louise knew I was coming back here to be with you. She kept saying, 'Don't you have any pride? He already threw you over once.' She was fed up by the time I left."

He picked a sliver of cork from the tablecloth and creased it with his thumbnail. "So what would she say about you and Sappho?" He surprised himself; he hadn't known he would say anything.

Poppie stared for a moment—blankly, then bitterly. "Let's not play games—why don't you just tell me what you really know. Do you already know everything?"

"No—"

"How long have you known I've been back?"

"Since yesterday, like I said. And I don't know *any*thing else, I just saw you and made a guess. A wild guess, but correct, I'd say."

"Saw me where?"

"Downtown."

"Where downtown?"

"Poppie. I know you, isn't that enough? I could tell."

"You're really quite the detective."

"Yeah, I'm a bona fide dick."

"Sure you haven't been following me?"

"Poppie, come on, Jesus Christ."

"Okay. Okay, I'm sorry."

They were silent for a moment.

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"So where are you working—or are you?" he asked. "Haven't seen the Paula Hansen by-line lately."

"Oh, the university. I picked up some crazy hours at the fine arts library. Afternoons and nights."

"Jesus," he whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Just . . ." he shook his head, "that you've been right here and I haven't known. I don't know. I wish I had. So what's the story with your friend?"

"She's married," Poppie said, glancing up to register his reaction. "To a pretty nice guy, in fact. She might leave him, but I don't know. There were problems before me. I'm not sure she really knows what she wants."

He shook his head slightly. "How did this get started, anyway? I mean . . ."

"Are you so disgusted with me?"

"I'm not disgusted."

"Well you don't exactly look like you're fond of me."

"Christ, I fucking love you. The whole thing sort of threw me a curve, that's all. I don't know. I mean, think about it."

"Well I'm not ashamed, if that's what you're trying to get me to say."

"Okay, you're not ashamed, I'm not saying you should be. I just think it's so goddamned sad, Paula."

She unscrewed the silver top from the saltshaker and spun it slowly on the table.

"I do, really. I mean, I know you've had some back luck a few times. But it wasn't because of you I went back. You know perfectly fucking well that if it hadn't been for Rachel and the girls, you and I'd be together now. I mean, I'm not beyond being jealous of someone else in your life, but I still don't think you have to turn your back on men altogether."

"I'm not turning my back on men altogether. It's not some conscious, deliberate choice, Brendan, it's love. I'm sorry to shock you, but it is. I didn't suddenly assess my situation one morning and say, okay, from this point on it's women only. It just happened. And I can't imagine even feeling this way about any woman other than Liz."

"All right, I'm sorry." He took the salt cap from her and

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twisted it back onto the shaker. "Well are you at least happy with her?"

"I'm happy," she said. She didn't sound emphatic, but he believed she meant it. He remembered a letter he'd received from her months after he'd returned to Rachel, in which she had written: *I know it sounds rather too jaded, but I think compromise will be part of anything either of us ever has in the way of happiness now. Don't you think?* At first he wasn't sure, but after a while he realized she'd probably articulated the main truth of his life since he'd left her. Or maybe it was true for everyone anyway.

The phone rang, and he could tell from the familiar way she said "Hi" in two pleasant syllables that it was Liz Truax. "Let me call you back in a bit," Poppie said, and Brendan stood up from the table.

"You don't have to go," she said.

"Yeah, I do. I'm supposed to take the girls shopping." He started slowly towards the door.

"Doesn't Rachel do that?"

"Yeah, well, both of us, I guess."

"Mmnn. How are they? I mean, the girls *and* Rachel?"

"They're all fine. I hope you get to see Beth and Addie sometime. You probably will, I feel like a chauffeur some days, all over town."

"I'd *like* to see them. Guess I can't exactly pay a social visit to the Kelloggs, though. Wouldn't it be nice if I could? If we were all just friends, at least?"

"Yeah, it'd be nice . . ." They stood by the door for a moment without speaking.

"I might be going to Wales for the summer. Or Liz and I might. I don't know. I'm not really expecting anything of her. Can we see each other again?"

"I'd like to."

"You don't sound very definite."

"Poppie, after two years I'm still dreaming about you, for Christ's sake. Of course I'd like to. I'm just a little shell-shocked still, you know?"

"Just call me sometime. Anytime. Don't worry about who's here."

"Maybe," Brendan said. "I might," he added, but he knew the terms of their relationship had been permanently altered. And

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he still felt as if he hadn't fully wakened from an unpleasant dream.

He had to meet with Dan Truax on Monday. By the time he got back from the city clerk's office around four, Truax was sitting in his pickup out front, half an hour early. Brendan pulled in next to him and got out. "How you doing, Dan." They shook hands, Truax's palm a calloused history of untold woodworking. Brendan remarked on the new cargo rack on the back of the truck, stalling now, feeling hopelessly phoney, going through the goddamn motions when the man wanted a simple one-sentence answer for which Brendan hadn't yet devised a phrasing.

They stepped inside and Truax asked "D'you get the message I c-c-c-phoned you Friday night?"

"Yeah, I did." Brendan gestured to one of the captain's chairs and went behind his desk.

"I guess you've got news for me," Truax said.

"Yeah, I think it will be news for you." He reached for a folder at the corner of the desk, but still wasn't quite sure how he wanted to start.

"Look, I don't mean to be rude," Truax said, "but I don't want to diddle around, okay? She's seeing another guy, isn't she?"

"I've gotta tell you," Brendan said. He looked Truax straight in the eye. "She's not." He gestured to the folder. "I've put in quite a few hours on this. She's not seeing anybody else. She spends a lot of time with her friend Pop—Paula, the woman who works at the fine arts library. But there's no man."

"She's really spending all that time with Paula?"

"From all I see she is. She's got other lady friends she meets for lunch sometimes. She seems to *know* some of the men who swim at the Y on Tuesdays, talks with them at the pool, but that's it. I mean, there's nothing."

"Hmm." Truax didn't look too satisfied. "I want to believe it, but . . . Friday night? When I c-c-called you? She didn't come home till the next morning. I mean, I don't care what kind of ingenious excuses, there's only one reason a grown woman doesn't make it home at night. It's not like I've never dicked around myself before."

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"Yeah, I *followed* her Friday night. That's why *I* wasn't home when you called."

Truax sat forward, interested now. "So where was she?"

"Down on Dodge Court. Paula Hansen's house. The two of them. Putting a lot of wine away as far as I could see."

"Just the two of them? No men?"

"Right."

Truax winced skeptically.

"Hey, you see these scratches?" Brendan held his wrists up, each of them streaked with thin lines of scabs. "I broke my fucking balls climbing a tree to see into those kitchen windows Friday night. I'm telling you, that's where she was."

Truax was giving in to a very slight smirk now. He nodded his head. "That's what she said when she called. About one-thirty, two a.m. Said she and Paula drank too much, that she was gonna c-c-c-"—he stopped and carelessly drew the L with his finger, twice this time before it worked—"crash there. Jesus, she was really at Paula's?" He let out an airy snort of amazement. "I didn't believe it."

"Believe it," Brendan said.

Truax was still half suppressing a smirk. "How'd you know she was going there Friday night?"

"A little luck, really. I was in your neighborhood. Saw her car and picked up on it."

"I'm impressed. You do good work."

"Yeah, I'm a bona fide dick." He was embarrassed for Truax, the guy praising his lazy, lying services just because Brendan was telling him what he wanted to hear.

Truax nodded to himself. "Well, maybe I've been foolish then, I don't know. It's not exactly an A-number-one marriage these days, whatever she does with her time."

"Aah, shit, we all go through bad times," Brendan said.

"Yeah, I guess. What am I gonna owe you, anyway?"

"Don't worry about that yet."

"Well, you can probably understand I don't want to pay you with a check. Liz k-k-keeps books for the shop and all."

Brendan wanted to quote a minimal figure—he'd put in few enough hours—but then Truax might reasonably question whether he could say with any certainty what Liz was up to. He pointed to the folder. "I've got some of it here, but my log

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book's at home. I'll drop an invoice off in the next few days. When you're alone."

Truax nodded and stood up, thanking him, shaking hands again, looking a little relieved, though he clearly knew his troubles weren't over.

Brendan stood by the window and watched him drive off. He was through for the day, and what he wanted to do now was drive out to the amusement park near Malletts Bay, slam fast balls back at the automatic pitcher for half an hour. Other cops, he remembered, when a mood had them, used to go to the basement of the station house and bang away in the low-ceilinged firing range; but Brendan's private therapy had always been the automatic pitcher. During the thing with Poppie that year, and especially in the weeks afterwards, he'd been a regular out at the bay, sometimes dropping fifteen bucks a week on baseballs. And all the time entertaining a perverse fantasy he'd never given in to: standing on top of the plate empty-handed, letting the machine, set at Major League speed, fire away at him. Stupid.

Just as driving out there seemed stupid now. He walked to the car and drove slowly in the direction of home, not wanting to go there yet, but not sure where else to go. At the light in front of St. Anthony's he stopped and watched a catechism class emerge from the big double doors, remembering how his father used to make the sign of the cross whenever they passed a Catholic church in the car. For just a moment he considered parking and stopping in for "a visit" as his father used to call it, but decided he was just pitying himself and being melodramatic, trying to soothe his guilty depression with sudden piety and humility. Even so, he wasn't ready to go home yet, and instead drove down to the lakefront.

The plan for construction of a wood-chip plant, which had been such a hot issue with the board of aldermen several years before, had been defeated. There were still oil tanks and a few unsightly coal banks off to the south of the ferry dock, but there were also new bike paths and grassy areas with swing sets and fountains, the sight of which often inspired in Brendan a surge of prideful vanity. For these had been *his* alternative proposals for the lakefront, projects he had helped realize in his final two years on the board.

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His days with the board of aldermen were over, though. Everyone said reelection would be a breeze after the lakefront issues, but when it had come time to declare his candidacy in January, he'd let the deadline slip by. All those hours could be better invested in Beth and Addie, though he couldn't really say he was giving them the extra bulk of attention he'd once thrown into city affairs.

What he needed was the energy and idealism of his younger self, back when he was so damn sure he'd be a flawless husband and father. Or maybe he just needed to visit Poppie. That was the thought that had been hovering somewhere just short of a decision all day. But when he pictured her in the kitchen at her apartment, or behind a desk at the fine arts library, he knew that wasn't what he wanted either. He wasn't ready for a purely platonic friendship. Nor did he want to share her with Liz Truax. And yet neither was he willing to usher the confusion of a full-blown affair back into his life. He'd begun to see that in the years since they'd been together, Poppie had acquired an almost mythical status in his imagination. Maybe it was better just to preserve that.

He got out of the car near the ferry dock and watched some men adjusting a cable out on the breakwater. When they finished he wandered over to the big slabs of granite piled at the pier's edge and noticed a kid about Beth's age fishing nearby. He had an aluminum pail crammed with thin green perch still alive in water, each about five or six inches long. "Looks like you've done pretty well today," Brendan said.

"Yup, I guess." He was an urchiny kid, skinny, with a grubby white T-shirt and brown hair barely longer than a butch. "I don't eat 'em anymore, though," he said.

"Why not?"

"My teacher says these perches got mercury poisoning. You can't see it, but it's in there."

"Yeah, I'm afraid she's right." Let your vanity gnaw on that one, big guy. All that time spent worrying about the goddamn waterfront when the lake itself was dying. Hadn't seen the forest for the fucking wood chips. Barking up the wrong tree again.

"Uh-huh. He."

"What?"

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"My teacher. It's a he."

"Oh."

"I'm gonna throw 'em all back in as soon's I get one more," he said, tugging gently at the line, his attention out on the water like a seasoned old angler. "Pulled in a rock bass a little while ago," the boy said. "But he flapped outa my hands as soon's I got the hook out."

"Rock bass? Big one?" Brendan pictured a heavy grey fish gliding along the lake floor with a stone in his belly.

"Big enough. Fourteen inches easy. Guess he knew I was thinkin' of keepin' him." The boy reeled his line in and plucked a thin ribbon of lake grass from the lure. "You know what time it is?"

"Yeah," Brendan said, "just about six." Across the lake the sun was edging down behind the Adirondacks. Time to get home to Rachel and the girls. His three women. "Oh, all these women in my life," he would tease when he found himself unable to keep up with their several demands. But in the years since Poppie he had to be careful about such remarks. For a man who had held the opposite sex foremost in his thoughts since the age of twelve, it sometimes struck him as a divine and ironic intention that he should be charged with the upbringing of females only. As if someone were saying, See, these women of the world, not just your own little plunder garden, Brendan boy. Here are two you'll have to look at a little differently.

But it was fine with him. Two healthy daughters he couldn't have loved more. At times he had to wonder what a son might be like, but it was a mystery he could live with. Besides, girls were probably easier in the long run. Not that Beth and Addie were prisses. And they were both fond of doting on Daddy, securing his seal of approval for every little thing, which in its own way could be as gratifying as the flattery of a grown woman's attentions. Not to mention a whole lot safer. To them he was still an infallible protector, still a little bit immortal, and it was a welcome role. The only problem Brendan could foresee was that someday the doting would focus on someone else, maybe even someone he didn't care for—a young man as selfish and irresponsible as Brendan himself. But that, he figured, was the real crux of the lesson set out for him.

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CHARLES TOMLINSON

Siena in Sixty Eight

The town band, swaying dreamily on its feet,
  Under the portraits of Gramsci and Ho,
Play 'Selections from *Norma*', and the moon,
  Casta diva, mounts up to show
How high the sky is over harvested Tuscany,
  Over this communist conviviality within the wall
Of a fortress that defends nothing at all.

History turns to statues, to fancy dress
  And the stylishness of Guevara in his bonnet. Here,
Red-bloused, forgetful sales girls
  For the revolution, flirt with the males
At a bookstore under an awning of red:
  Lenin, Che, Debray and Mao—
The unbought titles, pristinely serried.

'Realism and sobriety,' one might write of the art show:
  In *No to Repression*, a procession of women
With raised fists, shouts No, No, No.
  And between *American Bombers* and *Black Boy Cleaning Shoes*,
Somebody, unteachably out of step,
  Has gouged intently into paint
The Stigmata of St Francis in *Miracle of the Saint.*

Consciences drowse this summer night
  Warmed by the after glow. Fragrance of cooking
Weighs on the sense already fed by it,
  The wild boar turning and turning on its spit;
And the air too greasily replete to lift the red flag,
  The morning headlines grow fainter in the dusk:
'Where is Dubcek?' 'Tanks on the streets of Prague'.

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Paris in Sixty Nine

for Octavio Paz

'I love,' I heard you say,
'To walk in the morning.' We were walking,
Spring light sharpening each vista,
Under the symmetrical, freshly-leafing trees,
By boulevard, bridge and quays the Douanier
Had painted into his golden age
Of a Tour Eiffel perpetually new.
I replied: 'I trust the thoughts that come to me
When walking. Do you, too, *work* when walking?'
'Work when I am working . . . ?' My error
(Traffic was too loud to fight with words)
Came clear to me at last—for I
Am far too fast imagining that my friends
Prefer, like me, the stir of street or landscape
To four walls to work in. Sunlight
Had begun, after a night of frost, to warm
The April air to temperate perfection,
In which the mathematics of sharp shade
Would have gratified Le Nôtre, 'auteur de ce jardin':
His bust surveyed it: in the pavilion there
The subtler geometries of Cézanne. Refaire
Poussin après la nature!—he and the auteur
Might have seen eye to eye, perhaps,
But for the straight lines and the grandeur.
All was not easy here. Gendarmerie
Clustered at corners, still unrelenting
After the late events, although the theatre
Deserted by its actors now, lay silent
But for the sloganned walls. 'De Gaulle,' I said,
'Is an unpleasant man.' 'But a great one,'
You replied, to my surprise, for you
Believed when the students had their Day
It was a sign that linearity
Was coming to its close, and time

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Was circling back to recurrence and fiesta.
  Before the walker the horizon slips from sight.
What matters in the end (it never comes)
  Is what is seen along the way.
Our feet now found confronting us
  The equestrian bulk ('Paris vaut une messe!')
Of Henri quatre in the Place Dauphine,
  Horsed on the spot that Breton called
'The sex of Paris', legs of roadways
  Straddling out from it. Was it the image
Drew him to that statue, or had he
  (Eros apart) a taste for monarchy?
'Pope of surrealism' is unfair, no doubt,
  And yet, it comprehends the way he chose
To issue edicts, excommunicate his friends.
  I saw his face look out from yours—
Or so it seemed—the day that I declined
  To dine in company, which led you on to say:
'Always the Englishman, you want to found
  Another church.' So, always the Englishman,
I compromised and came—Paris vaut une messe.
  For it was Paris held us on its palm,
Paris I was refusing as well as you
  And should have said no to neither:
Paris looked in on all we were to say and do,
  And every afternoon concluded with
That secular and urban miracle
  When the lights come on, not one by one,
But all at once, and the idea and actuality
  Of the place imprinted themselves on dusk,
Opening spaces undeclared by day.
  All the recurrences of that constellation
Never reunited us by that river.
  Yet, time finding us once more together
On English soil, has set us talking,
  So let me renew my unrequited question
From twenty years ago: 'Do you, Octavio,
  Work when you are walking . . . ?'

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In a Cambridge Garden

to the same

Another town and time—and little left of it
  Before you were to go. Castles in Spain
Stood solid to receive your royal progress
  While Wren detained us. Beyond his colonnade
Arched and shaded, as if Italian paviours
  Had laid the flags we echoed on—our way
Led us to lawns whose midday shadows
  Seemed cast from trees as massive
I was about to say, as those that grow
  In Mexico itself—but no: this plane,
This copper beech, both take their scale
  From their own setting, and could stand
Nowhere but here, their power contained
  Beside a wall in England. Had you stayed on
Twenty years ago, had I gone
  To live in the house at Nine Mile Swamp,
My children would have been Americans, and you
  An exotic in this Cambridge garden. Now
These inquests on past possibilities
  Serve merely to say that we
Were right to choose the differing parsimonies
  Of the places we belonged to. I thought
That I could teach my countrymen to see
  The changing English light, like water
That drips off a gunwale driving through the sea,
  Showing the way the whole world
Dipping through space and cloud and sun,
  Surges across the day as it travels on
Turning. In short, I stayed. Your life,
  Pitted against the rigid summa
Of Thomists turned politicians, grew
  More public every year, and mine
In its privacy, more sociable, perhaps,
  Than one that contemplates that upstate view

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Over uninhabited acres blank with snow.
  What would you have missed the most?
First, I know, would have come colour.
  We cannot pretend our island exhalations
Do not douse the harshness of that clarity
  That burns back in ochres, oranges and reds
Off Mexican walls. The ground beneath them
  Wears a brown Franciscan serge—
Not drab, because seen at first intensity
  Under such a light. Some, I suppose,
—Not you—might find the colours of a place
  Small reason for living there—
It took an Englishman (John Locke),
  Meagre and precise, to call them 'secondary'.
And here, fanaticism and moderation meet—
  I think when Mercader killed Trotsky,
The colours of that garden in Coyoacan
  Counted for little: he hurried through
Drawn by the thought of what it was he'd do,
  Senses sheered back to its accomplishment.
So you returned. To the monoxide monotony
  That taints the trees of Mixcoac—
'There *are* no gardens,' as you said, 'except
  For those we carry with us.' Now we, too,
Must hurry through the hospitality
  Of this one, ready for the car
(The gates are opening) that awaits you
  (And the street looks in). And so we coincide
Against distance, wind and tide, meet
  And translate our worlds to one another,
Greet in verse. A poem is itself
  A sort of garden—we are waving our farewells—
Seasonable at all times as we bring
  Our changing seasons to it—we are losing sight
Of the speeding car that is launched and one
  With the traffic now and the mid-May sun.

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At Hanratty's

I catch the flare of fire
at the kitchen door,
out of which emerges
a sweating ballet
of waiters and waitresses.
Do waiters, as Sartre wrote,
act quote waiting unquote? Here,
since half of them
are actors between shows,
the question grows more intricate.
That woman who is acting 'crying'
behind her quivering napkin,
down to the requisite *Boohoo*
(enunciated a little too clearly
to be quite true, however)
lowers her linen guard
to reveal—not the anticipated grin—
but a wet face, and feelings
that are painfully genuine. But do
waiters act? I think Derán does.
She is surprised that I
can recall her unusual name, and so
wants to hear from me what else I know.
She has a way of whirling past
like a small dervish, and indeed,
Turkish by descent, 'my parents'
she explains 'are Kurdies.'
Is this plural all her own,
or an affectionate diminutive
or—she is moving fast—
was it 'Kirghiz' she said?
I ask myself
what Turkish girl would wear
that unkempt head
of electric hair without curl
or unaffectedly try on

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such innocent familiarity?
She acts like an American.
That stolid waiter
scarcely acts at all, I think:
we try his patience
by not ordering 'yet,' and then
desert his table
(too close to the entrance): he remains
patient and willing
to lend an ear as he passes
to the lady in glasses who
wants to know 'where . . .'—
I cannot hear the rest
and neither can he
but, pivoting on one foot,
bends over closer
to seize her syllables.
Perhaps he, too,—
who knows?—was one of those
who grow into a patience they begin
by merely feigning.
The woman of tears
is leaving, her three
friends steering her by,
supporting her now silent distress
(I glimpse a dry face and eye)
to the door we must follow them through
out and on
into the stir of this street
of nationalities learning parts
that are new to them—of Juans
who would prefer
to be called John.

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BRUCE MEYER

A Human Balance: An Interview with Charles Tomlinson

Charles Tomlinson was born in Stoke-on-Trent in 1927, and received his university education at Queens' College, Cambridge. His published volumes of poetry, Relations and Contraries *(1951),* The Necklace *(1955 and 1966),* Seeing Is Believing *(1958 and 1960),* A Peopled Landscape *(1963),* American Scenes and Other Poems *(1966),* The Way of the World *(1969),* Written on Water *(1972),* The Way In *(1974),* Selected Poems *(1978),* The Shaft *(1978), and* The Flood *(1981), culminated in the publication in 1985 of his* Collected Poems. *Since then, Tomlinson has published* Notes from New York *(1984), and* The Return *(1987). A new Canadian edition of his* Selected Poems *was published by Exile Editions of Toronto shortly before his most recent volume,* Annunciations, *appeared in the autumn of 1989. Among his other works, including several volumes of translations and graphics, are two volumes of essays,* Some Americans: A Personal Record *(1981) and* Poetry and Metamorphosis *(1983). He lives in Ozleworth Bottom in a remote part of Gloucestershire, and teaches at the University of Bristol.*

MEYER: Eden is one of the major themes in your work (as well as being an important image). In "From the Motorway," you say "How shall we have it back" and in "To Ivor Gurney" you associate Eden with England (an influence of Rupert Brooke, perhaps?). Could you define and discuss what Eden is to you?

TOMLINSON: My poetry began with a certain distrust of myth. I wanted the newness of fresh perceptions, and the one myth which seemed to embrace that without getting in the way was the myth of Eden. You don't choose such things with a completely conscious awareness of all the implications, of

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course—they choose you, in a sense. Eden immediately brought in the idea of the freshness of perception, but it also carried with it the idea of the fall, a possible loss, a possible return. Adam naming the beasts came to mind. So did the apple—unbitten and bitten. Cézanne's paintings of apples were never far away either. Not that all this was a mere sliding from one association to another. What it came to was—and this lesson had been brought home when, as a painter, I'd tried to draw things—the world resists us, but in certain moments and in the creation of certain poems, it seems to come to us new and whole. Eden is there again. We've ceased grabbing anxiously at things, we are content to leave the apple on the tree and just look at it, we respect other things and out of that respect a relationship becomes possible. So the final implication seems to be you must not reduce the apple to a mere symbol of your feelings as Byron thought high mountains are a feeling. The mountain and the apple *must* both be resistant to us as Cézanne realized with *his* apples and with Mte. Sainte Victoire.

So, you see, Eden is involved in an argument with romanticism. I think if you merely see it as unspoiled England and drag in Rupert Brooke's "The Soldier," you make the concept rather questionable and rob it of its historic dimension. Fresh perceptions may and frequently do, for me, concern English landscape, but they can also involve the streets of New York, or disused marl pits in Staffordshire, and so far as these perceptions are centered on relationship, they enter into a moral and political dimension. Hence the poems about assassination and the dangers of the fanatic ego attaching itself to abstractions that blind it to relationship. Rather than just Rupert Brooke we are in the world of Danton, Lenin, Trotsky—in fact, the whole mess we have inherited worldwide.

MEYER: The theme of driving comes up in your recent work, especially in "The Questions," and it is something which I haven't seen very much in British poetry—that sense of mobility as an image or theme—although it is something which pervades North American verse.

TOMLINSON: I suppose driving does owe something to having driven across the vast spaces of America. It also owes something

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to the fact that I drive to and from work—in all, fifty miles. Then, when our children were at school I drove them there at an extremely early hour and across some of the loveliest bits of England. Thus, my poetry flows quite naturally off what I happen to be doing and not out of any theoretic preconceptions—so that a phrase like "the theme of driving" already moves all this onto the territory of hindsight and is making a package out of what for me continues to flow. In driving, of course, you see things at a different speed and at a different angle from those which one's ancestors knew. So there's fresh perception for you and a different way of looking at landscape. But, fundamentally, I think, I ought to stress the daily origins of my poems. At the time I spent driving north every weekend, when my parents were in the process of aging and dying, I started to see—not Rupert Brooke's England—but the industrial Midlands through the windscreen. So driving comes into many poems from *The Way In* written at that time, and driving is caught-up there with the destruction of British cities in the postwar years. *The Way In* came out in 1974 but it reached back over that whole phase of destruction in which the actual existence of the car is centrally involved. Ergo driving can be both Eden—as some poems in *Written on Water* of 1972—or, as in the title poem of *The Way In* it can be loss of Eden, where I have a battered old couple, caricatures of Adam and Eve after the expulsion, pushing odds and ends through the ruins on their handcart.

MEYER: You said, once, that you were influenced by Ruskin's prose and you've discussed this influence in previous interviews and statements; but I was struck by something you said to Peter Orr in 1961 regarding Ruskin—Ruskin's ability to "actually look at nature and consider what it has to offer one." *Notes from New York* (earlier poems in that volume), is more human-centered. Do you feel Ruskin's nature was a necessary prerequisite training for your eye for what you are doing now?

TOMLINSON: All my poems are human-centered because I am in them all and I am human. They are written in language, a human invention, and they are addressed to other human beings—in the first place my wife, and then anybody who finds them of interest. I think early-non-human and late-more-

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human is an incorrect distinction, because the early poems are discovering a language—are refining the human artifact, if you like—in which something worthwhile can be said. And one of these things is that, as human beings, we live in a universe which goes beyond the merely human, is animate or inanimate, is vegetable, mineral—stone, clay, light, dark, what have you. We have so violently annexed that universe to our needs and our fantasies, literary, economic, political, we need to look again and find language for it and, in doing so, become more human, although *in* the finding of that language we are, say, putting to one side the ego, the personality, the what is *thought* to be "human." Ruskin comes into this because in the first volume of *Modern Painters*, in the great chapters on the truth of color, of *chiaroscuro*, of space, skies, clouds, water, vegetation, he makes one look at things as never before and learn how to express what he calls their "peculiar and separating form." This is what appealed to Hopkins when he resolved to keep his journals from "a Ruskinese point of view." And from Hopkins and Ruskin and their great anticipator Coleridge—another keeper of journals—I found a discipline that taught me the possibility of making what one saw daily feed art—the possibility of consciously living in a world of structured appearances that are different than we are, but in their very particularity give us a field of experience to ponder and take purchase on. But one constantly has to win it back from human indifference and human aggression. So—very well!—those early poems approach rocks and stones and trees—and apples—distrustful of the previous acts of human aggression and self-inflation. As Kandinsky says, "The artist needs discreet, silent, almost insignificant objects . . . How silent is an apple beside Laocoön." Ruskin, of course, got rather noisy on occasions, and often one has to beware of his rhetoric.

MEYER: With regard to your interest in Ruskin, in your "Introduction" to *Eden*, you quote Wallace Stevens, who said, "To a large extent the problems of poets are the problems of painters, and poets must often turn to the literature of painting for a discussion of their own problems." What were the essential problems that Ruskin solved for you?

TOMLINSON: Looking back to that quotation of Stevens, I

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think I now dislike his use of the word "problem." It makes me feel that art solves problems. Everything these days has become a problem that politicians, psychologists, economists promise to solve. Whereas I think art—Ruskin's prose in this case—offers new possibilities, new awarenesses. In the light of his own best work, you begin to see that his showier rhetoric won't do. His lesson—if that's the word—is to make yourself a servant, as Adrian Stokes said of Cézanne, of "the outwardness of the external world." At one level, the issue is an ecological one and Ruskin was one of the earliest critics of industrial pollution. At another level, it means chastening yourself by realizing your relationship to all that surrounds you. It seems to me that Hopkins took all this a stage further. With him, the idea of the "peculiar and separating form" of things gets extended to the differing *selves* not only of kingfishers and hawks, but to the human self and he is able to relate all that outwardness to an inwardness that Ruskin—who was to go mad—rather feared. In the notebooks and then the poems, Hopkins achieves the kind of language within which that inwardness can be brought to a focus. One reason for the density of his verbal structures is that the "peculiar and separating form" of words themselves is being called upon to balance, to reconcile inwardness and outwardness, to embody and yet give resistance to the flow of inwardness. The act of gazing, in the notebooks, brings to bear much that lies below the level of will and conscious intentions, directing energies outside the maze of self. Hopkins' diction, too, goes over the top like some of Ruskin's prose. So learning from Hopkins requires a further chastening of the medium if you are to benefit from his discoveries. "The essential problems," to use that phrase, are never solved. Certain possibilities are discovered—for good or ill. And it's up to you to use them to work towards a human balance. What painters and poets have had to recover is a less predatory relationship between inner and outer—between our egos and all they threaten to aggrandize.

MEYER: You have been interested in the subject of translation and have written about it, particularly in *Poetry and Metamorphosis*. Christopher Middleton remarked that he embarked on translation as an art because it gave him that sense of what he

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called "the other," an alternative mentalité and language to his own. Was this the case with you?

TOMLINSON: In a curious way the business of translation and my fascination with translating re-duplicates or rather puts in a different manner this whole question of inwardness and outwardness, the self and the other. Your inner man, your "sole self" to borrow Keats' phrase, needs the challenge of other ways of doing things, of the other possibilities, of more comprehensive and perhaps definitive standards arrived at by previous poets. If Pope hadn't translated the whole of the *Iliad* and most of the *Odyssey*, his own "original" work would necessarily lack the full dimension it has. By simultaneously submitting himself to and measuring up against Homer, he grew by cubits and spans. Similarly with Dryden. Dryden without Ovid would never have become the Dryden we know. Fitzgerald without Omar would hardly have existed as a poet. Christopher Middleton locates otherness in an alternative mentalité and language. Perhaps the great Augustans tended to homogenize the otherness of language a bit too readily. Historically, that was wholly inevitable. Their own diction was so decided a thing, they rarely let the nature of Greek or Latin challenge it in the way that (say) Pound does with Chinese in his Confucian anthology translations.

You ask me about my own experience. Well, from different poets I learned different things—things I'd never have known if I hadn't struggled to find English voices for them. From the nineteenth-century Russian, Tyutchev, who was so important for Pasternak, I learned concretely what, in a given case, you can or cannot do in translating. Russians invariably say, "Of course Tyutchev is so straightforward. The meter is iambic and the stanzas are regular." But, in fact, that is where the trouble begins. In a polysyllabic and inflected language like Russian, the way words fit a meter and a stanza form is quite different from English. It's a different fit, both because of the length of the words and because when words change with their different cases, there is an immediate structural link in the sentence which means the order of words can be varied. In English where nominative and accusative are the same, you'd better be sure that nominative comes first or that the verb is transitively

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unambiguous in a given direction. Also in Russian, as in Latin, you have no articles before your nouns. An English wholly without articles would be grotesque. So already the text is dropping to pieces before your eyes and you must decide how you are going to reconstitute it—in a living voice, and in a living meter. Frequently, it won't be the meter of the original. Pope's rhymed iambic couplets, being the all-purpose form of his day, made a most serviceable substitute for Homer's unrhymed hexameters, though the effect of the rhyme is not imitating anything to be found in the original sound of Homer. What it *is* imitating is the forward movement and energy of the original. Chapman who tried to imitate the longer Homeric line by using fourteeners, has too much padding, too many flabby lines, because English doesn't have the inflections and the variable word order that facilitate the power of the original. It was translating Tyutchev I first experienced the mysteries and the miseries of this question of metrical fit.

As Middleton implies, the difference of fit signals a different mentalité. You can't always directly translate that mentalité, but its otherness is a continual spur as well as a challenge. I tend to over-use this word "resistance"—I've already used it of nature. It's unavoidable once more in speaking of translation. And it's healthy for a poet. He has something to bounce off, something to direct his inwardness at and find it being placed in relationship. So foreign words are another sort of nature—pebbles and grit that can't be immediately ingested and subdued to one's own will. Their resistant grain is of a piece with the rest of life.

MEYER: Both you and Middleton have a very definite sense of history in your works but approach the subjects from somewhat opposite directions: he from a revulsion, to speak out against the horrors of the modern world; and you to preserve the world from those horrors by underlining its sense of infinite detail and individual interaction.

TOMLINSON: Of course, my poems on assassination and revolution in *The Way of a World* and *The Shaft* not only underline the infinite details of the world—the details of the room Trotsky's assassin would like to "put down" with Trotsky—they re-create the horrors that oppose the variety of life in the name

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of some harsh political would-be solution. I want the mess of the Trotsky killing to register, as I want the unstoppable consequences of Charlotte Corday's killing of Marat to register. Somebody said recently (and gratuitously) that I was as obsessed by assassination as Owen was by wounds. Now this is a bit of a critico-psychological put-down, pretended judiciousness that would rise above the poet. My aim, in fact, has been to show how you cannot reorganize the world by simple acts of will and that these acts of will have an entailment you cannot prophesy. Again, the resistance of the world runs counter to our fantasies and it will do so whether these fantasies are political or poetic. In a recent book which deals with political terrorism, Octavio Paz's *One Earth, Four or Five Worlds*, Paz sets my poem "Assassin" in the context of worldwide terrorism. He says: "This poem is the best refutation I know of the fallacy that sees in history a substitute for conscience"—that is, making oneself part of the supposed inevitability of the Marxian dialectic and not humanly admitting the limited nature of one's own sense of what shape history *ought* to take. The reason I baulked at your early-non-human, late-more-human distinction, was that in either phase my poems teach the same lesson—or rather, they teach the infinite variety that opposes human aggression—and in doing so, in drawing people into a fuller consciousness via the intricate meshing of words—words that are so intimately part of our daily life, we tend to forget they exist—the poems explore the wonders that should give us pause, that should give us patience, and so ballast us against the horrors and also against that hysteria of over-reaction that every so often—in so-called confessional verse, for instance—seeps into poetry. It seems to me, to revert to your distinction, that a reader who truly absorbs the moral imperatives of my pre-human-centered poems (I'm laying on the jargon, of course), would perhaps be in a position to refuse to join in that excitedly sick game. To judge from the success of poetry that at once simplifies and exaggerates, that over-reacts, if you like, there is a good deal of therapy waiting to be done by the sort of poems that speak quietly and firmly, whose passion is for clarity and variety. If they can make themselves heard above the media blare.

MEYER: I understand that you were led to poetry through your interest in film. What films are most important to you? Is

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poetry a visual art for you and have you tried consciously to write poetry to appeal to the visual aspects of a reader's mind? What are the necessary poetic requirements for making a poem visual?

TOMLINSON: In an interview with Richard Swigg that appears in the autumn number of *PN Review* for 1987, and is now reavailable in a book edited by Kathleen O'Gorman from University of Missouri Press, *Charles Tomlinson, Man and Poet*, I've talked about the pleasant shock I got from Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* when very young. It was technically a *tour de force* and historically dense with the period which just preceded one's birth, then into which one had been born. Along with all that, the actual angles of seeing, the photography strongly appealed to me. Not to go over once again what I've already said to Dr. Swigg, I think I can touch on one or two points. The ways of seeing owed a lot to Gregg Toland's deep-focus photography whereby you could have all levels in clear focus and background and foreground related in a most dramatic way. It was this ability of Toland and Welles to relate things in depth (both visual and narrative) that deepened what sense I had of a world (and now for a favorite phrase of mine!) "bodied over against one" and also infinitely extensive. Neither Welles nor Toland ever again achieved the sort of artistic concentration they brought to *Kane*. And therein lies the sadness of cinema—whether you get the right team, the right producer, whether you aren't going to be sucked into commercial vacuity. Poetry, thankfully, isn't teamwork and you are as good as you are. Welles never got the right team again and maybe—to be unkind—he had something of the egotistic emptiness within him of the tycoon he was portraying. I continued to look out for Toland's work, but he too never found the same sort of catalyst that the team, the moment, the fresh visual discovery brought. For instance, he filmed William Wyler's *The Best Years of Our Lives*. There were interior scenes in that film that visually offered a space as interesting as parts of *Kane*, but the concept behind the film was vapid soap opera. He filmed Ford's *Tobacco Road*, but once more what was being said was less interesting than what was being seen, and so contaminated, as with the Wyler, what was being seen, perhaps less sentimentally. The

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unused abilities of a man like Toland strike me as tragic. I learned a lot from the classic cinema—from Welles, Eisenstein, Pudovkin—but you feel it was all on the brink of being compromised. I came to feel that all the junk one sat through to see one half-good film wasn't worth the candle—and I sat through and searched out a lot. I'd even written film scripts (all rejected) and dreamed (quite foolishly) of directing. Films alerted, so to speak, the visual sense I already had, and ultimately, I suppose, painting was far more important for me than cinema. These things fed the poetry, but poetry being a verbal art comes at the visible world necessarily through words. Using words (since we mouth them over, have to get our mental tongues and our real tongues around them) has a certain physicality in common with the act of laying on paint (transforming touch into thought and thought into touch). The inwardness we've already spoken of—the warm, dark interiority that wants to get out into the light—is always playing round words and round the way you apply strokes of paint. The necessary poetic requirements for making a poem visual are that the words should be lithe and alive as they bring that sense of inwardness physically up against the physical resistance of whatever is before you. The two are going to meet and, in some sense, marry. This brings a third *M* onto the scene—metamorphosis—the inner and the outer, the felt and the seen coming up with a third reality, the poem, in which the other two change each other's original constituents. You are bringing together—ideally—the separating precision of the visual and the fusing flow of tactile sensation. But all this is much more boring and abstract than the way it happens in a poem.

MEYER: The image of "crystal" turns up quite frequently in your earlier work and one has the feeling that what you wanted it to convey was that hardness in nature which simultaneously allows light to pass through.

TOMLINSON: Yes, the crystal combines hardness in nature and the activity of light passing through that hardness and transforming it. It's a very telling instance of metamorphosis. I think artists got very aware of the crystal at the time that the cubists were trying for a multifaceted way of looking at things, so that

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the facets of the crystal represent different ways of seeing and seeing through. You are no longer stuck with the impenetrable lump of nineteenth-century physics and all those atoms as solid little billiard balls. You're no longer tied to "single vision" as Blake mocked Newton. Side by side with Cubism comes the discovery of X-rays. You could now map out crystals by passing X-rays through them and scientists came up with this term "space-lattice" to describe the interior crisscrossing structures of a crystal, structures seen as relative to one another—a concept surely fruitful for both painter and poet. Newton is now decidedly out and Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity extends all this to modern physics. I suppose light passing through the crystal brings the question back to human perception and away from the physicist's formulae and away from any ventures into free-floating futurist cosmology, yet holding onto the new vision of things. A crystal and its actual structure, its facets, brings in the question of repeating forms and the way, in poetry, the repeating forms of, say, rhyme and meter intersect with all the multiplicity of life and nature. So in talking of the crystal I should want to keep in view this intersection of measure and multiplicity as well as of hardness and light—relativity once more.

MEYER: Restraint seems to be one of the hallmarks of your work. Could you comment on the importance and your use of restraint? It seems you were reacting, very early on, against both unrestrained poetry and poetry which demanded too much control, such as the verse produced by many of the Movement poets.

TOMLINSON: You are right in saying I reacted against both too much and too little restraint. When I hear the word "restraint," though, I think how little it represents me as a person or as a poet. I'd much prefer to "restraint" "Edenic excess," if that's possible—perhaps "exuberance" would be the more tactful word. Because my poems arise out of a sense of excitement—I see something and it sets me moving, it doesn't restrain me. I don't feel I'm putting on the brake all the time. I feel I'm opening things out, I'm on the move and the sense of measure—measured exuberance, so to speak—comes from the way

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the due limits of art and the due limits of life—flesh, place—keep intersecting with the plenitude, the multiplicity, I've just spoken of. "Restraint" makes me sound like a very dull proposition. And it would hardly account for the enthusiasm I have for, say, opera, where emotional latitude is all the time being brought up against the sheer formality of the art that not only measures all that excess, all that exuberance, a formality that is—well, not bursting—but rammed full of life and all life's ripple of feelings. I think my poems are nearer *that* than the sort of undertaker's job some critics suggest with talk about coolness and—yes—restraint.

MEYER: For the most part, you've veered away from traditional forms in your poetry. Why?

TOMLINSON: Conceivably the whole story is that I've veered to and fro. After my first pamphlet, I took Hopkins' hint and tried for some new tunes by varying the position of the accents in the line and varying the number of unstressed syllables. Then I've used short-lined free verse that catches-up the breathless excitement of certain moments. But I've also veered back, on occasion, to the use of the iambic pentameter—I started writing "Charlotte Corday" in my four-stress meter—stresses at variable positions in the line—but the high Roman fashion of her life brought me back to the high Roman fashion of iambic pentameter, though a pentameter suppled up, perhaps, by my work in so-called free verse. I think I can sum up by saying that I want all possible worlds and I want enough metrical variety—traditional and otherwise—to capture them. So we come back to Eden once more, perhaps, and the way it keeps bringing us its promise of fresh and inexhaustible possibilities. We're "in the beginning" once more. Or a bit later than the beginning maybe, with the light and darkness, the firmament, the dry land and the waters. And Adam sets out to name them all again.

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ALLEN HOEY

First Winter

November. He undressed for the last time and folded
his uniform away. Sam Brown, fatigue cap, the painful
shine of his single bar, awarded just a month before
he found himself returned, purple heart and service ribbons,
all stowed in the footlocker he hauled to its attic
grave beside the trunk that held the cornet he'd refused to play
since his father died. From the dormer window
he surveyed the street, the disarray of hedges and flagstone
heaved by years of frost and thaw and the damned
invasive roots of sycamores that challenged even the cellar walls
from their curbside posts. Their leaves had fallen now
and a thin knot of smoke whispered into the hereafter
from a barrel in the retired dentist's yard across the way.
There he went, staggering another arm load up the drive.
Next door the blind woman's daughter, not much
older than himself but already the dowdy scent of the spinster
clung to her like perfume on a pillow after his wife's
left the bed. At a party he met a friend
just back from the Pacific. Talk of bowling scores
wove between episodes from bootcamp, drunken sprees
in leave ports,
and a solid month of Brussels sprouts, three meals a day.
Couple of us next weekend, the friend offered, see if
five years handling a rifle pays off in a buck. Nice to get
some return. He stood rigid, beer uncomfortably cocked
halfway to his choked-off laugh. Nights his wife
lay with him, they tried to make a child—a girl, he almost
wished aloud: let it be a girl, a blessing as his back arched
before he rolled off like a spent casing. She stayed,
legs clenched, ten minutes, fifteen, then, because he rocked
the bed the way the ship rocked him crossing the Atlantic
before they found out, days short of Panama,
the Japs had given up, rose and padded to her guest room bed
and let him pitch gladly into sleep.

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JANE BROX

November

The year is a length of resilient twine
wound tight—I've just heard the pawl tick
against the last notch of the ratchet,
and now sound is absent.

Funny how it's almost a relief—
no more stiff leaves in a supple wind,
the tight-hearted fragrance of apples
has disappeared into thin air.
You don't have to worry about versions
of what happened, or what might be—
bare trees reveal what is,
what is, what is.

6 A.M.

The day suggests itself
like a wild ruminant—a hint
of a presence, say, a set
of eyes or an undisclosed scent
in the air. She sets
two places and makes his breakfast
and lunch at the same time.
He drinks coffee and listens
to the weather.

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She sees him to the truck,
they kiss under the last slip
of the moon, and he's off.

She remains there until familiar
shapes become apparent
and the phantom horizon
washes clear. Behind her
the kitchen light burns
through sun-up.

Marsh Hill Road

A stranger would think him a spare figure
under heaven, here, where a yank of the latch
scatters a flock of roosting swifts.
It's not a back way or a short cut
to anywhere. A car or two an hour
and miles between houses.

Almost everything he has was his father's,
right down to the beamy pickup
on blocks in the front yard.
The place takes all his time,
but he appears clear in his choice,
or he has no choice,
like a just man answering
a string of questions.

He's only distracted when a car passes.
They flash like a March pond,
those eyes that won't leave you.

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MICHAEL CARRINO

Across the Bay the Saxony Is Burning

If it weren't so filthy
Rosemarie might wade into Lake Champlain. The sky
above the Saxony Hotel is churning,
red. Rosemarie fans her wet, polished nails
while sirens howl over Chazy Landing
and Rousse's Point. She recalls

North Country fires: the Rook Bar and Grill,
Wharf Restaurant, the monastery,
Belle a La Maine, the Phoenix Theater. Richard,

she remembers, never recognized
connections. When he found affection
he kept looking, wanted to burn down
the Witheral Hotel, a battered
old building that once hosted President Harding,
but lost his nerve. History

was lost on Richard. He refused to believe
history is everyday living. When he moved to Malone
Richard slept all day, shot pool all night,
needing fresh chalk and spare change more than a woman.
Last year Malone caught fire.
Half the downtown was gutted.

Rosemarie wondered if Richard
lit the match or burned. For Rosemarie
the Saxony will always be the night
she cartwheeled across the damp, crusty dancefloor
after too much Scotch and urging
and wandered home alone with dirty hands. Richard
never let her sleep over,
sleep being so personal.

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This Thing We All Have To Get Through

Another reckless night—rain and a man alone,
his Harley disabled, is blindsided by *La Forza*
del Destino. I bet you never considered
leaving him stranded on the turnpike shoulder.

You're an ornery bastard, always
flopping that beer belly into confusion
you don't own. Now, half your leg
lost, and the lone rider dead, crushed

papercups litter the floor
as you struggle with a hospital bedsheet
waiting for the two A.M. nurse to shine
her flashlight in your bloodshot eyes.

I'm frightened the dice are loaded.
I'm frightened of dumb fate,
fate that stoked that semi
as it bore down while you both
shot the bull in the rain; by chance,
God damn it, by chance. By accident,

while you helped the stranger
in the rain, something haphazard and mechanical
killed him, turned you upside down,
almost emptied your pockets.

I want to believe
no "force" made you stop.
Nothing moved you but your willful
man-child love for this thing we all have

to get through. You *chose* to help.
I want to lose my bet.
I want to owe somebody something.

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What Hurt So Much

One last promotion, singles night,
failed. The Food for Less manager
DJ'ed one ballad too many. The unattached

mulled around the improvised dancefloor
wondering what hurt so much to waste
Thursday night sipping cheap wine
while the lettuce and tomatoes spoiled. Politely

they paid quickly for butter, ham,
white bread or beer, and left. The manager
padlocked the door behind them; phoned his wife.

No one answered. He imagined
disaster on Brentwood Road; imagined
his wife with another man in a swaybacked
motel bed, the station wagon, his recliner,
the gazebo; decided to skip the habitual

Thursday night stop at Dalono's and drive
home, as he drove home
after The Food for Less grand opening

ten years ago: red and white balloons
glowing in the floodlights, the fresh tarmac
jammed with anxious customers. When he arrived
home that night, they made love.

He dialed again and, once again,
realized it was ten years later;
late, and he must start over.

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RICHARD MOORE

On High

Over the constant irritation of the avenue,
the irregular shrill quarreling of the tires
that keep whipping the pavement, as with dry wind
in gusts, in fits, and the library's portico fitted

with pillars, caught in floodlight, where a flag
flops lazily that someone didn't take down—
over all this tawdry nonsense of the town
and much more that I shan't trouble to describe,

Venus rides in the blue night, a gem, a pulse
pillowed in richness like a queen. Night brings her
forth, out of her depths. Never have I seen
blue so royal, so deep, never on earth. O,

I shall lose urge and ability to breathe, to feel,
here, watching . . . No, not yet. I must tell still,
down in this jar and jumble, something that blue up there
is like between the pale horizon and black zenith,

something, a glory beyond all guessing, all foretelling,
like—yes, nothing else will do—it is like Sibyl
in bed: a royal boldness and a lush variety,
each touch and squeeze, sure, exact, imaginative,

and all mingled with such a symphony of groans,
writhings, desperate pantings, tossings of the head . . .
one would simply never have dreamed it possible
after a quarter century of faithful marriage.

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Strange—and I don't even much like Sibyl.
She resembles my wife, sympathizes with her,
haunts, glitters in me like that planet, deepens
my blue but irritates me as that avenue

traipsing its ignorance under the night sky.
What's one to do with these glories handed one
in such sordid places? Gaze, Pilgrim. That grand blue
already slumps into darkness as I trudge home.

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SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH

The Difference between Me and Bill

Before he became a part of what is meant by
going belly-up,
back when he still wore suits and sold
business forms all over Hillsborough
County (Hell, all over
Florida, he'd say then),
he'd often grab a bite to eat
at a small luncheonette on Tampa Street,
sit near the plate glass
window and watch the demolition going on.
One day, the crane drops a girder and it neat
slices off the back of a man's head,
just like salami he tells me, and he's the first
and only one to see it happen. He feels it
isn't exactly fair for him to have to see it,
and it's only the beginning
of a long line of things he'll have to witness
though he doesn't leave the County,
and though his friends go on
to become magistrates, politicos,
simple kinds of moochers, while he goes
belly-up and watches his family fall away,
and I come to feel it isn't fair either,
it's not like my demolition.

In my demolition there's a house behind me
just filled with a trashy crowd.
Then the women and the children leave
and only a drunk guy and his buddies are left.
The heat and lights have long since been killed
so they tear off the mantel and the inner stairs
and burn them. They bring dogs to the house.
The dogs get mange, and the guy and his buddies

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start to puke in broad daylight. Then the house
is condemned, the drunks are forced to move
and the city hires a crew to wreck the place.
It is a loud, graceful demolition
but somehow over quick,
the walls of the three stories
collapse against themselves
while sights as embarrassing as bathtubs,
as intimate as kitchen curtains,
come into everyone's view.
The last push before the final fall
produces, high above the heap
of what will soon be rubble,
an entirely alive, very fat raccoon
sitting on the back of a scarlet wing chair.
And it is surprised, and annoyed,
but not afraid. The raccoon escapes in time
and clearly she is a mamma raccoon, and that night
there is a moon over what is now a field.

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JOHN LOUGHERY

Early Moderns: Benton, Marin, Spencer

HAS IT EVER BEEN EASY TO BE A PAINTER IN AMERICA? Ignored or made to feel marginal to the wider, more "serious" interests of society, or lionized too soon (or for the wrong reasons) and subjected to marketplace pressures that work against the needs of a slowly unfolding career, painters have usually found it rough going on these shores. What's more, in many ways the plight of those early American modernists like Arthur Dove or Marsden Hartley, who lived a hand-to-mouth existence and lacked a sympathetic audience, is not so very different from the flashier experience of a Jackson Pollock, an Andy Warhol, or a Julian Schnabel. None of these men was able to evolve in a reasonable fashion, enjoying the luxury of an educated following, feeling economically secure yet unseduced by the traps of fame, money, and self-parody. A sustaining middle ground: that's what we don't seem to offer, or offer only too rarely, in this land of all-or-nothing.

The life and work of Thomas Hart Benton, the subject of a retrospective that concluded its tour at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art this summer (after traveling to Kansas City, Detroit, and New York), necessarily brings pessimistic thoughts like these to mind. In 1990 it's difficult to see Benton's works merely as paintings, some of which are excellent and some of which are spectacularly bad. Instead, Benton inevitably becomes a case study in cultural history, an example of a man who turned his back on the challenges of modern art to tell his own brand of homey stories and comforting nationalist myths. It is a situation for which the artist himself is not entirely blameless.

Seen in conjunction with recent exhibitions of two of his most talented contemporaries, John Marin and Niles Spencer, the Benton show forces us to remember the weighty pressures American artists have had to cope with. For individual as they are, Benton, Marin, and Spencer shared a common dilemma. Born in the late nineteenth century, they all had to confront two equally difficult tasks: the evolution of a professional identity in a time when it meant next to nothing to be an artist, and the clarifying of their relation to European modernism and the radical ideas about painting that

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Cézanne, the Cubists, and the Fauves inspired. For Benton, especially, these proved to be problems of immense proportions.

The child of a prominent Missouri political family, Benton seems to have started his adult life with a healthy ego, plenty of ambition, and abundant natural talents. One of the earliest works in the show was a splendid self-portrait from 1913, the year the painter turned twenty-four, and it suggests an already confident sense of form and color. It is the face of a man slightly suspicious, a little on edge, but ready to face the future. In a black suit, white shirt, and blue tie, holding a hat and gold-handled cane, Benton could be an American version of a sitter in a Manet; the darkness of the clothes and the subject's hair allow for some shadowy blurring into the somber, thickly brush-stroked background, while the intensity of shirt, hand, and face are all the more forceful in contrast to the browns, blacks, and greens around them. This painting and many of the even earlier drawings illustrated in the show's catalogue[1] are just good enough to make one wonder if Benton might not have been a great realist, in the manner of Robert Henri and George Luks, had other influences and experiences not pointed him in different directions.

To be born in 1889, though, meant for a serious artist exposure to the new pictorial ideas that the generation of Henri and Luks (born in the 1860s) never contended with. Thus, after a productive period of awakening in Chicago and study at the Art Institute, Benton headed for Paris. There, like so many other young men, he came under the sway of those painters who believed that realism was for tired academicians and that loftier achievements awaited the artists who understood Cézanne and were willing to explore the possibilities of flattened space and color abstraction. Foremost among those influences was the California expatriate-painter Stanton Macdonald-Wright, an avid student of color theory and an egoist of the sort to make Benton look shy and humble.

Befriended by Wright, who believed in his potential, and tangentially allied to Morgan Russell, an early abstractionist and ally of Wright, Benton embarked on the period that he would later repudiate: Thomas Hart Benton as a classic if unsuccessful modernist. What remains of the work from this era (much of it destroyed by Benton) allows for an examination, however partial, of that aspect of the man that most of his admirers are still unfamiliar with. These paintings also tell us two things about him. First, we learn that the new thinking about space, color, and non-literary subject matter that Wright and Russell found so exciting—they called their art "Synchromism," meaning "with color"—did not take root in Benton's imagination in the 1910s in any convincing way. He was not ready, though the

[1] THOMAS HART BENTON: An American Original, by *Henry Adams*. Alfred A. Knopf. $60.00.

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pressure to join in must have been intense. The few examples in the exhibition of his art from this period are truly disappointing. *Upper Manhattan* (1917) is not so much a Cézanne-style landscape as a timorous, uncertain homage to the master, his constructivist still lifes of the same year have an awkward, tentative feel to them, and full-fledged "Synchromist" paintings like *Bubbles* (1916) are, at best, painstaking experiments with abstraction. Given the weakness of these efforts, Benton's inclusion in the legendary 1916 Forum Exhibition of Modern American Art in New York has to be attributed to the fact that the show was curated by Stanton Macdonald-Wright's brother.

But we also learn, thanks to what are called "the Suitcase Bentons," not discovered and exhibited until 1982, that even as he was transforming himself into a Regionalist painter of heroic figures and social tableaux, Benton was still preoccupied—as late as the 1940s—with the possibilities of non-representational art. The quality of these small paintings is uneven, yet many of them are surprisingly self-assured, unusual in their color choices and completely devoid of anecdote. Benton's furtive concern with abstraction isn't altogether surprising (he was, after all, Jackson Pollock's mentor and teacher in the late 1930s), but it is an odd fact to absorb in the light of his belligerent stance toward modernism in the twenties after his return from Europe and his defiant view of himself as "an artist for the people."

Self-Portrait With Rita of 1922 captures the emergence of that new Benton, home at last and ready to create a fresh persona following his disillusionment with "the aesthetic virus" of modernist theory and his decision to reestablish a bond with "the real people" of America. The result is a view of the artist as a mythic conqueror, muscles on display and wife at his side. There's still a vestige of the Synchromist interest in twisting, spiraling forms and distinctive shadings of color. In fact, for its color alone, this is an appealing picture to look at long and hard. What is unsettling in the portrait, though, is the thoroughness with which Benton had expunged his earlier self. The young dandy from Missouri who was mocked by the other boys for his bohemian dress is replaced by a personification of masculinity—the artist as sturdy trailblazer, Natty Bumppo stripped to the waist. The innocent in Chicago discovering how many of his friends and teachers in the art world were homosexual (a shock Benton never seemed to get over) has been remade into a paragon of heterosexuality, and in the active, robust scene of bathers and rocks around him, the world has been carved and arranged into a place of security, virility, and harmony. If his countrymen assumed that artists were effete, effeminate, and of little consequence, Benton would show them otherwise. By the mid-1930s, with his picture on the cover of *Time* (the last word in legitimization in America) and Regionalism emerging as a much-applauded movement, he was ready for a level of success and

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recognition that Macdonald-Wright, Russell, Marin, Spencer, and most of their generation would never know.

This is not to say that Benton's style of painting is a humdrum brand of realism without his own stamp on it or that he was, at the outset, an opportunist in search of a trend. Clearly his art at its best, in its vivid color and distortion of the human figure, made use of what he had seen and learned in Europe and New York. It looks like no one else's. And clearly he was genuinely interested in America's history and heartland. In fact, some of the pictures in this show hold up very well indeed, like the famous *Cotton Pickers (Georgia)* of 1928, a rich egg tempera with an oil glaze, or his portrait of the composer Carl Ruggles.

What is disheartening, en masse, is the bombast and busyness of the murals (and so many of them!), the hokum of the farm scenes, and the hardening into caricature of the elongation of Benton's men and women. A flavor and a technique that worked in *The Lord is My Shepherd* in 1926 is embarrassing in *Susanna and the Elders* in 1938 and *Persephone* in 1939 and pointless in the 1948 rendering of a scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, commissioned by Louis B. Mayer. (Not for nothing did Jessica Tandy, the original Blanche, complain that Benton's macho slant was all wrong, that he had painted only "Stanley's side of the picture.") By the time we come upon the massive *Trail Riders* (1965), a rather lurid fantasy evocation of men on horseback beneath a snow-capped Western peak, we have seen the last ounce of Benton's creative juice expended on a theme that was hackneyed forty years earlier.

"I thought Art needed to remember a little the smell of the stockyards," Benton once commented. Ironically, it is precisely that—the grime and energy of the real world, the best source for new pictorial ideas—that is not to be found in most of these stylized paintings, too many of which smell of the studio rather than the stockyards. Ultimately Benton became a prisoner of his own down-home legend and the America that existed only in his mind.

Just as this large exhibition was not likely to change the opinions of those (this writer included) who see Thomas Hart Benton as a man who failed to use his great gifts to become an authentic modern artist, so it was not likely to shake the faith of his fans. His popularity among the general public is strong, and on all three of my visits to the show there were plenty of contented faces in the crowd. No surprise there. What is to me interesting and unexpected is the amount of serious attention he has received in the art world in the last two years. I can only conclude that in a decade in which major American museums have given retrospectives to dusty Victorian realists and French academics (e.g., Sir Edwin Landseer, Gerome, Bouguereau), something unthinkable in the heyday of modernism, anything is possible.

To savor "the real thing" in American art this year, it was necessary

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Thomas Hart Benton
SELF-PORTRAIT WITH RITA (1922)
Oil on canvas

Collection: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Jack H. Mooney

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to go to the National Gallery in Washington, D.C. The John Marin retrospective there, which inexplicably did not travel to other museums, was a celebration of an exceptional talent sustained over five fruitful decades.

Thirty years old at the turn of the century, John Marin embraced the new aesthetic climate as excitedly and intelligently as any of his contemporaries. He also, apparently, never experienced any yearnings for a popular audience or doubts about his place in American society of the kind that troubled Benton. One reason for this might be Marin's good fortune in establishing an early alliance with Alfred Stieglitz, who acted as dealer, protector, and kindred spirit. Stieglitz considered him part of his great triumvirate of Marin, Dove, and O'Keeffe. To be so highly regarded by one of the most influential and demanding figures in the American art world was already to have the sort of audience and backing Marin needed. Who knows how well he would have managed without his friend's assistance?

The pictures at the National Gallery ran the gamut from the earliest nature studies, all lyrical watercolors of great delicacy, to the late oils that seem like paint-frenzied products of an emerging Abstract Expressionist. Right from the beginning of his career, though, Marin was ready to abandon the cherished ideal of representational fidelity, especially as it pertained to watercolor. The emotional impression evoked by his subjects, rather than their photographic reality, was the goal. He simply assumed that the art public would catch on in good time; it was not his business to brood over those questions. Marin's versions of St. Paul's in Lower Manhattan, the Brooklyn Bridge, or the Woolworth Building accept the modern principle that the object or figure doesn't have to be neatly marked off from the space it inhabits. Vigorous washes of color, awkward planes, and jumbled contours accurately express—with minimal detail—the essence of the city's power or the dynamism of waves and sand. A watercolor like *White Waves on Sand, Maine*, painted in 1917 in Marin's third year of summering in New England, is a flawless example of the ability to balance the almost abstract demands of art (the reverberations of the lines that indicate the shore make this almost an organic abstraction) with the desire to represent and honor the subject itself. Marin was one of the last American artists to take his inspiration directly from nature who, at the same time, was not in any way a recorder of picturesque views.

Though he looked more like the owner of a general store than an imperturbable artistic rebel, Marin was obsessed with the issue of freedom. He wanted to be free to paint as he wished and free of political concerns, critical strictures, and commercial anxieties. This desire led him to greater expressiveness, more and more visible joy in the use of his materials, and increased confidence as his colors and arrangements became looser and wilder. As the years went by, the risk-taking didn't stop. *Red and Green and Blue—Autumn* (1921) is an

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edgy, chaotic, mesmerizing clash of color, *Untitled (Brooklyn Bridge)* of 1925 is formed by the most elementary mass of black bands and glowing circles, and *Movement in Greys and Yellows* (1946) is a superb sample of those late oils that are as much about paint itself as the setting in which the image was conceived. Small traces of red, yellow, and blue streak the cloudy sky and the rough sea, but most of Marin's image is created by fierce jabs, swirls, and gashes of black and white. That a seventy-six-year-old American artist was painting this freely and aggressively in the postwar years is hard to believe.

President Truman once declared Thomas Hart Benton "the best damned painter in America" and was pleased to have him paint the murals for his Presidential Library in Missouri. The culturally backward leader of the free world was Benton's proper audience by that time, the logical conclusion of the artistic choices he had made. On the other hand, it's doubtful if Harry and Bess even knew who John Marin was. That doesn't change the fact that by the time of his death in 1953 Marin had created a more bountiful, personal expression of his love for the land and his love for the making of modern art than Benton or any other American of his generation.

Niles Spencer stands, oddly and quietly, somewhere between Marin and Benton, neither an awesome talent nor a lost cause. At the Whitney Museum's Equitable Center branch in midtown Manhattan, forty paintings and drawings by Spencer were on view in May and June. This is the kind of well-presented, small-scale survey that could be seen in New York only in a gallery like those at the Whitney's branches, a point which should be remembered by all who knock the Whitney for their arrangements with the corporations.

Spencer is generally regarded, when art-history texts bother to take note of him at all, as the creator of MoMA's Cubist *City Walls* (1921) and as a member of the Precisionist school of painting. America's first indigenous modern-art movement, Precisionism took the urban and industrial development of the twenties for its theme and painted a landscape of smokestacks, skyscrapers, grain elevators, railroads, factories and towers in a spare, often geometric style. For more than two decades Spencer worked productively in this vein, from *White Factory* in 1928 to *The Silver Tanks* in 1949. The same visual pleasures found in the paintings of Charles Sheeler, Charles Demuth, and Louis Lozowick are present in Spencer's images, juat as they are open to the same criticisms. (The gripe has always been that this mode of painting, like Pop Art, blindly accepted and even glamorized, rather than questioned or attacked, the modern blight it depicted.) The distinctive features of Spencer's Precisionist work, seen in *Across the Tracks* (1934) and *Waterfront Mill* (1940), are the evident physicality of his brushstrokes and palette-knife masses and the greater presence of clouds and sky, two attributes which make his paintings less severe than the typical example of this style. If there is something fastidious

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and puritanical about Sheeler & Co., then that is probably less true of Spencer than any of the others.

Part of the appeal of this exhibition was the chance to see the artist's works that preceded his classic urban pictures and those that followed, or grew out of, them. Still-lifes like *Interior* (1925), *Still Life with Pineapple* (1927), and *The Green Table* (1930) have a precise and reserved sensuality about them, while the later works from the early 1950s veer toward straight, respectable geometric color abstraction. Identifiable imagery fades away in *City Shapes* and *University Place* (both of 1946), and is largely gone by the time of *In Fairmont* and *Above the Excavation* in the early fifties.

Spencer could do a great deal with a sharply limited palette. His browns and greens, his beiges and blacks, and all the subtle, stoney, earthy combinations of those colors he could effect are as moving in their own way as Benton's reds and Marin's blues. Why this should be so is something of a mystery. By rights, a Spencer oil—devoid of people, a sense of movement, sharp contrasts or bright light—should have an arid, dull feel to it, but that isn't the case. Sincerity or authenticity are the only words that come to mind: these pictures romanticize the industrial world less than many other Precisionist works and present their subjects through the filter of a personal sensibility, without any intrusive trace of the creator's ego. Like the poetry of William Carlos Williams or the stories of Raymond Carver, this is an art that asks us to find meaning in familiar and undramatic sights.

Niles Spencer's paintings invite quiet contemplation and provide deep satisfactions. He'll never be a crowd-pleaser. In him, it is possible to sense an artist, not unlike Marin, who understood the greatness of his calling and how little it had to do with the cover of *Time* or the need to appear manly, relevant, and important.

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RICHARD HORNBY

The Blind Leading the Blind

HAMLET IS THE EASIEST of Shakespeare's great tragic roles. G. H. Lewes, writing in the nineteenth century, maintained that no actor ever failed in it, in contrast with Othello, in which hardly anyone ever succeeded. The emotional demands for playing the introspective Dane are minor in comparison with the rages of Lear or the jealous convulsions of Othello, and the physical demands are less than for Macbeth; an academic fencing match is paltry by comparison with two muscular fights to the death. The play itself, although Shakespeare's longest, has only a single plot, which is tightly constructed and compelling, so that the audience is carried along even with a weak actor in the lead.

Last spring, the New York Shakespeare Festival produced *Hamlet* at its Public Theater, as the latest play in the "Shakespeare Marathon," which aims to present the entire canon by 1992. Kevin Kline played the lead, and, like Gielgud and Olivier and many other actors in the past, directed himself. The result was an innocuous production, free of the infuriating gimmicks that have become standard with Shakespeare in America, but also free of energy and imagination. Nevertheless, it held your attention, proving that it really is impossible to make *Hamlet* boring, no matter how hard they try.

Robin Wagner's set design at the Public's Anspacher Theater (a nice, high-ceilinged space, with good acoustics) consisted of a bare thrust stage with two pillars at either side, obviously inspired by the famous De Witt drawing of the Swan Theatre in 1596. Martin Pakledinaz's costumes were basically modern dress, counterpointed by vaguely operetta-style military uniforms. All this boded well. Like all of Shakespeare's plays, *Hamlet* is set in a world of the imagination rather than the real Denmark, or any real place, so that, no matter what basic period the play is performed in, it is wise not to be too specific. The designs should not make some modern "statement," but neither should they be a history lesson.

Alas, however, the director and designers here seemed more concerned about what the visual effects of the production should *not* do than about what they *should* do, which is support the story, with all its gradations and contrasts. Thus, the drab colors of the costumes (mostly blacks, whites and grays) created an austere mood, but often failed to tell us who was who, or what the characters' relationships were. For example, nothing in Horatio's costume (a dark pullover

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sweater, slacks, and jacket) told us that he is a scholar, and the foppish Osric wore a sober costume with bowler hat, white vest, and tie, making me wonder why he is called a "water fly." Hamlet's severe black suit with white shirt was appropriate for mourning, except that the rest of the court were dressed in more or less the same colors; when Gertrude admonished him to cast his nighted color off, he should have told her to look at herself in the mirror.

Like the costumes, the bare setting turned out to be merely vague and uninformative. In Elizabethan times, locale was established symbolically, by the use of set pieces. Henslowe's inventory of the prop room of the Rose Theatre in 1598 lists trees, rocks, tombs, steeples, stairs, a bed, "one Hell Mouth," and other miscellaneous items. Kline used almost nothing of this sort (even the pillars did nothing but get in the way); nor did he or the other actors show us through their acting where they were supposed to be. Furthermore, the very structure of the Elizabethan stage was emblematic, according to conventions going back to the medieval theatre, with the roof over the stage referred to as "the Heavens," and the place below as Hell. Thus, when Hamlet and Laertes fought in Ophelia's grave, which would have been in an open trap in the stage floor, it carried important symbolic resonances for the original audience. In Kline's version, however, there was no trap; her body was simply carried across the stage to some uncertain resting place out of sight, while Hamlet and Laertes fought at floor level. In its own way, this production was as visually gimmicky as a nude version set on the moon; whenever details are sacrificed to an overall concept (even a modest, unassertive one, as in this case), drama flies out the window.

The best thing about Kline's performance is that he spoke clearly, with understanding, which is more than can be said for most of his fellow actors. Brian Murray was a mushmouth as Claudius, for example, and Diane Venora give a horrid, introspective, vague performance as Ophelia. (Believe it or not, Venora once played Hamlet in a production directed by Festival founder Joseph Papp, one of his less-than-bright ideas.) Only Josef Sommer, as a surprisingly dapper Polonius, showed some comprehension of the dynamics of his role, holding the audience and winning some good laughs as the self-important Lord Chamberlain.

None of the actors spoke with any sense of Shakespeare's verse, which American actors commonly treat as a necessary evil, though it will in fact carry you soaring along like a jet plane if you treat it with respect. Kline's voice lacks richness; he has good diction and comprehension, as noted, but he spoke with a narrow range of pitch and volume, and little emotional coloring. He might be good in some of Shakespeare's lighter roles—he has considerable charm and ease on stage—if he did not treat verse like some weird artificiality. When he paid attention to cadence at all, he rendered it outrageously ("The play's the *thing*! . . . wherein I'll *catch*! . . . the *conscience*! . . . of . . . the

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King!"), like some loony opera singer perversely singing off key. Most of the time, however, he simply plodded through the verse, speaking in a quiet, flat tone of voice, as if embarrassed to be caught performing in poetic drama. The time was, when an actor performing Shakespeare badly would tear a passion to tatters; the very term "ham" supposedly referred originally to actors overplaying Hamlet. Nowadays, underplaying is the common sin. Kline just drifted through the part, and the production as a whole had an undirected, undesigned, unexciting aimlessness.

The same might be said of the New York Shakespeare Festival these days. The Marathon, nearly half over, has been disappointing. When Joseph Papp announced the plan, it seemed exciting, especially the idea of luring some of our best movie actors to play Shakespeare. In other countries, there is much more crossover between film and stage acting than here, with benefits for both. But when it comes to Shakespeare, Papp is committed to a philosophy of having the blind lead the blind. An autodidact himself, he seems to believe that any kind of expert guidance is destructive to theatrical potency. He never uses dramaturgs, literary advisors who are standard in European repertory companies, and increasingly common in the United States. He has repeatedly hired directors for the Marathon who know nothing about Shakespeare; in this regard, Kline is actually better than most of Papp's choices. Furthermore, few of his directors have even done more than one play. Thus, not only has there been no on-the-job training, but there is no overall vision, however quirky, that might have given the Marathon focus. We have had a dreary succession of individuals who come in for a single production, demonstrate their incompetence, and move on.

Joseph Papp is now in his seventieth year. The New York Shakespeare Festival is so associated with him personally that it is hard to imagine it without him, yet obviously he cannot continue running it forever. It will certainly continue to exist without him; it has a large endowment (some seventeen million dollars, amazing for an American theatre company), three theatres at the Public in the beautiful restored Astor Library, plus the outdoor Delacorte Theatre in Central Park. Nevertheless, in recent years the only thing giving it continuity has been the dominant personality of Papp himself. In European repertory companies, directors, designers, and actors are salaried people on long-term contracts; at the Public, everyone is hired only from show to show. Where the European companies will have a dozen or more plays rotating at once, at the Public there can only be three, one for each theatre. The savings that come from having actors perform at night and rehearse in the daytime is lost; even more important are the loss of artistic focus and sense of ensemble that come from a permanent company.

One admirable quality of the New York Shakespeare Festival has been the willingness to do original scripts, but here too the choices in

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recent years have been haphazard. Running in the spring at the same time with *Hamlet* were *Spunk*, a thin, tentative adaptation by George C. Wolfe of three stories by Zora Neale Hurston, a black writer of the Harlem Renaissance; *Ice Cream with Hot Fudge*, two new one-acts by Caryl Churchill, the heavy-handed British playwright; and, later, a performance piece entitled *The B. Beaver Animation* by Mabou Mines, the trendy avant-garde troupe. This is eclecticism with a vengeance, reflecting more a desire to avoid criticism by covering all bases than any coherent artistic vision.

Joseph Papp is a master at promotion, and a political genius. Recently he turned down a grant of $50,000 from the National Endowment for the Arts because of the Jesse Helms censorship proviso, a courageous stand that won him a good deal of favorable publicity. In a typically brilliant coup, Papp was immediately able to recover the money by private donation. But there are ominous signs on the horizon: In the fall, an additional $350,000 grant will have to be turned down as well. The Festival's $17 million endowment is actually a drop from $24 million, because of four years of large deficits. *A Chorus Line*, the longest running show in Broadway history, which earned $39 million for the Festival, has just closed. Furthermore, unlike other nonprofit theatres, the Festival has never had many subscribers, again reflecting an ad hoc, show-to-show approach rather than an intelligent overall policy. Papp's promotional skills are now needed more than ever.

The latest word from the Festival is that Papp has appointed JoAnne Akalaitis, co-artistic director of Mabou Mines, to be his "artistic associate," with decision-making autonomy; at the same time, he named three young men to be directors of the three theatres at the Public. This may be a sign of long-needed artistic coherence, but the particular choices are dubious. The anti-intellectual, anti-literary Mabou Mines troupe is the last place to look for a Shakespearean director. Akalaitis staged a credible *Cymbeline* last year, but otherwise she is noted mostly for directorial zaniness, as when she set a production of Beckett's *Endgame* in the subway. The other three new directors have no experience with Shakespeare at all. Are we to be treated to more invincible ignorance? The New York Shakespeare Festival has been a major cultural resource for the city for 35 years, but it may end up as a mere historical footnote.

Steppenwolf, the celebrated Chicago theatre company, brought its enormous theatrical adaptation of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* to Broadway in late March, after a tour that included the La Jolla Playhouse in California and the Royal National Theatre in London. The result was less than triumphal. The cast of 35 was perhaps the largest in New York history for a non-musical; Kevin Rigdon's settings were elaborately ingenious; Frank Galati's adaptation of the novel was straightforward and clear, and his direction

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slick; the advance promotion was extensive and costly. There was only one problem: the show was dull.

Steppenwolf is known mainly for its actors, and they have turned out a few good ones, most notably John Malkevich and Joan Allen. What was most striking about the *Grapes of Wrath* production, however, was the universally bad acting. It was impossible to avoid comparison with the well-known film, directed by John Ford and starring Henry Fonda, who was supported by many of Hollywood's leading character actors. Every single performance in the film is better than its Steppenwolf counterpart. In the film, the characterizations are boldly delineated, then subtly shaded. In our first view of the Joad family, at dinner just before they set out on the road, they seem like slobbering yahoos, fulfilling every stereotype of shiftless Okies. By the time the film is half over, they have not only become fully humanized, they seem outright heroic, embodying the finest human qualities of decency, courage, loyalty, and incredible endurance.

The Steppenwolf performances, by contrast, were so underplayed that the actors seemed to be walking in their sleep. When Grampa (Nathan Davis) spoke of his urge to go to California and bury his face in a huge bunch of grapes so that the juice would drench his chin, the actor sounded as if he was ordering a Diet Coke. Terry Kinney as the ex-preacher Jim Casy wandered around bemused, without an ounce of passion or curiosity, though he is supposed to be a pivotal character, more or less Steinbeck's mouthpiece for his ideas on sin, duty, and social injustice. Gary Sinise, a founding member of Steppenwolf, played the lead role of Tom Joad with a bit more fire than Kinney had, but lacked the subtlety and intelligence that Fonda showed in the part. *Grapes of Wrath* is ultimately about Tom's quest for understanding, in a world that seems absurd and unfair. Sinise just hopped along from incident to incident, acting petulant, but neither growing nor learning.

The film was a triumph of the Hollywood studio system, which hired actors and directors on long-term contracts, enabling them to do fine, imaginative work without having to worry about selling themselves. The system, of course, produced a lot of hack films, and was often derided at the time for operating like a factory, but from time to time masterpieces could definitely arise. The studio system was a carry-over from the practice of theatrical repertory companies, which had long been organized in America on a permanent basis. Steppenwolf aspires to be a theatre company that is organized in the same way; its permanence and stability are supposed to give actors and directors freedom to be daring and creative. A tame, risk-free production like this one is a betrayal.

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* is set in the 1930s, continuing his chronicle of black life in America during each decade of the past

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hundred years. A family in Pittsburgh owns an antique piano, which originally belonged to the master of their ancestors in the days of slavery. The widowed young matron of the family, Berniece Charles, wants to keep the piano; her brother, Boy Willie, wants to sell it to help buy a piece of land in the South that was originally part of the plantation on which the family were slaves. The piano is covered with carvings made by their great-grandfather, depicting the family history.

The Piano Lesson is thus not only a historical play, but also a play about a family trying to come to grips with its own history. The controversy over selling the piano is not just a simple conflict between sentimentality and practicality. The piano is a symbol for Berniece, but an empty one. She will not even play it; her daughter, Maretha, picks at it in desultory fashion. On the other hand, for Boy Willie, selling the piano is not just a means of getting some cash. Buying a hundred acres of the old plantation is a way of getting control over the family's terrible past. The land for him functions as the carvings on the piano did for his great-grandfather. Taking something that belonged to the master and making it into his own is a means to power, a way to go on record and be somebody, an ultimate triumph over white oppression.

The first act of *Piano Lesson* is talky and slow, with lengthy exposition about half-a-dozen unseen characters that is more suited to a novel than to a play, but in the second act the pace quickens. As the conflict between brother and sister approaches tragedy, the tone of the play becomes crazily comic, as when Berniece comes down the stairs with a gun in her pocket, while carefully wiping her hands on a dish towel. Boy Willie's repeated attempts to steal the piano from the living room are thwarted by the sheer bulk of the thing, a piece of business that manages to be both highly symbolic and hilarious. The mystical overtones that occur in all of Wilson's work are more explicit than usual, with apparent visitations by a ghost from the family past, which is finally exorcised.

Ultimately, *The Piano Lesson* is not as tightly written as Wilson's *Fences* or *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, but he remains unmatched today for vividness of characterization, richness of background, sensitivity to American history, and use of poetic imagery. Motifs of ghosts (showing the influence of Ibsen and O'Neill), music, land, wood, and travel are gracefully woven into the naturalistic façade, in a way no other American playwright has done since Tennessee Williams.

Lloyd Richards directed superbly, as he has with all of Wilson's other plays. The players, from that small group of serious black American actors who are an unacknowledged national treasure, were all wonderful. Charles S. Dutton failed to get a Tony Award for his Boy Willie, but he deserved one for his inventive, varied, graceful, energetic, driven performance. (There was no timid underplaying

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here!) Dutton, a graduate of the penitentiary and the Yale Drama School, has a past of his own that he has exorcised.

Long-time theatregoers will be interested to know that the Living Theatre is alive, if not completely well, in a tiny store-front theatre on the Lower East Side of New York. The Living Theatre, founded in 1948 by Julian Beck and his wife, Judith Malina, became an important part of the experimental Off-Broadway movement in the fifties. It was also an important part of my own early theatrical experience; I saw all its major productions thirty years ago—William Carlos Williams' *Many Loves*, Pirandello's *Tonight We Improvise*, Gelber's *The Connection* and *The Apple* (which I saw on my honeymoon, which shows how stage-struck I was!), Brecht's *Man is Man*, Kenneth H. Brown's *The Brig*—and became infatuated. How wonderful theatre can be, I thought, and was hooked for life.

Then, as far as I was concerned, the Living Theatre went crazy. Although the Becks had always had an anarchist-pacifist viewpoint (which was OK by me), they also were devoted to a poetic concept of theatre, as the above list of plays indicates. Brown's *The Brig* was their first openly social-protest play, but it was far more than agit-prop; the rigors of survival in a Marine Corps brig were depicted with a strange, austere stylishness. Style was jettisoned in their later work, however, especially in *Paradise Now*, the epitome of mindless sixties radicalism, which had the performers (one could hardly call them actors) standing around whining about not being allowed to smoke marijuana or take their clothes off. Then they went off to change the world, in Europe, Brazil, Pittsburgh coal mines. Their low point for me came when Beck gave a talk at a national theatre conference around 1969, denouncing the entire Western dramatic tradition as cold, racist, sexist, fascist, imperialist, and maybe vivisectionist. To this day, I curse myself for not having booed.

Julian Beck died in 1985, having failed to change the world. Ask too much of the theatre, and you will receive too little. The irony of the sixties was that the more pretentious the LT became, the more notoriety it got, but the ultimate irony is that the notoriety led finally to its being dismissed as a historical quirk, its earlier, genuine achievements forgotten.

Since her husband's death, Malina has continued to run the company, which last spring presented Eric Bentley's *German Requiem*, based on Kleist's romantic drama *Die Familie Schroffenstein*. Bentley, the most distinguished drama critic living today, has written a number of fine plays, which are less well-known than they should be. This is because no one believes that a critic can have any practical theatre ability, but also because most of his plays are historical and political (in the style of Bertolt Brecht, his friend and mentor), while the prevalent fashion in American playwriting is narrow character study.

In *German Requiem*, two feuding branches of a medieval German

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family rule a divided kingdom. Mutual suspicion, envy, misunderstanding, and assassination are counterpointed by a Romeo-and-Juliet love story between the eldest son of one family and the beautiful young daughter of the other. The play can be seen as a parable about the recently-divided Germany of today, or about the wider split between East and West, or about human nature generally whenever two nations become rivals.

Although the play is crowded with incidents, including a beheading, a stoning, and several sword fights, Malina staged it deftly in the cramped space. The actors, always visible, posed like medieval cathedral statuary on long platforms on either side of the room; encounters between the two families thus took place between the platforms, or on a third, high platform at the back. This simple spatial iconography meant that it was always clear who was who, and always possible to follow the twists and turns of the political struggles. Bénédicte Leclerc's costumes, despite being constructed of the sleaziest of low-budget fabrics, also helped to establish character and mood, with a genuinely medieval look.

The acting, unfortunately, was uniformly amateurish. The LT was never known for superior acting talent, but there was usually sincerity and raw emotional power. The current group, mostly young, all non-Equity, lack even that. Malina had obviously worked hard with the actors, because their performances had balance and pace. They delivered the elaborate language stumblingly on the tongue, however, managing to overenunciate and slur words at the same time. Quiet, tense, humorless, their performances were an exercise in monotony. Nevertheless, I was pleased to see the LT back in New York, in a permanent (meager!) home, doing the kind of play they used to do in the old days—challenging, imaginative, well staged, and unashamedly literary.

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ROBERT S. CLARK

Music Chronicle

In 1797 Schiller wrote to Goethe that he hoped that "from opera, tragedy might evolve in a more exalted form." Goethe replied that "you could quite recently have seen the hopes which you put in opera fulfilled to a high degree in *Don Juan*, but this work is unique and Mozart's death has frustrated any prospect of a similar achievement."

So began the evolution of a cultural legend, one that quickly separated itself from the reality of Wolfgang Mozart's and Lorenzo Da Ponte's *Don Giovanni*, took on a life of its own, waxed and waned through cultural fashions, and continues to flourish in our own time, when the establishment esteems this work as the unquestioned claimant to the status of opera's supreme masterpiece.

The transformation of *Don Giovanni* into a cultural icon began when this fertile seed, first performed in Prague in 1787, fell onto the rich soil of Europe's emerging Romanticism. By 1813, E.T.A. Hoffmann, he of the well-known tales, a fervent musician and composer of eleven operas, and the very soul of nascent Romanticism, had dubbed *Don Giovanni* "the opera of all operas," and had taken a large step in the inflation of its reputation. The protagonist of his story "Don Juan—a Fabulous Event," published that year, was a traveler in a southern German town (probably Bamberg, where the author was conductor of the opera for some years) who stays at a hotel adjoining a theater in which Mozart's opera is being performed. In fact, he can pass from his chamber directly into a box. During the first act, a lady joins him—and turns out to be the Donna Anna of the opera. At intermission they discuss the work, and she leaves. Later he writes a letter to a friend telling him of the experience and his view of the work.

For Hoffmann, Don Giovanni was a kind of demonic superman and Donna Anna, his chief antagonist in the opera, an opposing spiritual force of equally superhuman dimensions. Like any Romantic hero worthy of the name, Giovanni is destined by his lofty nature and his disdain of the commonplace to a futile search for perfection, and because his arena is sexual pleasure, he unwittingly becomes the instrument of Satan. In Donna Anna's passionately virtuous nature he meets his match. They both attract and repel one another; since they cannot satisfy their outsized reciprocal passion, they must vie to destroy one another. Donna Anna is victorious, but by bringing about Giovanni's destruction she seals her own fate as well. Hoffmann's Anna, in the person of the prima donna who sings the role, dies at two in the morning, as the traveler finishes his letter.

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Hoffmann's tale was symptomatic. Through Byron and Liszt to Bernard Shaw, Edmond Rostand and Richard Strauss, Don Juan assumed a central place in the cultural mythology of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But before Mozart, the exploits and final damnation of the renegade usually identified as Don Juan Tenorio, a Spanish nobleman of the sixteenth century, had been everyday tender in the currency of Europe's popular imagination. For Hoffmann and the nineteenth century, Don Juan was worthy of Heaven's wrath only if he were possessed by a titanic force that threatened the moral order. For earlier playwrights and librettists, he was an ordinary rogue who meets a suitably violent and rousingly stageworthy end—not for his seductions, incidentally, but for blaspheming the dead Commendatore.

In most of the stage treatments of the tale throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, in fact, it is the murder, and subsequent appearance at supper, of the Commendatore that is central to the action. In France the common title was *Le Festin de Pierre*, and Molière was among those who utilized the story; in Italy it was *Il Convitato di Pietro* (Goldoni used it), and in Germany *Der steinerne Gast*. As these authors' names and a glance at the texts suggest, until the time of the Romantics the story was considered the stuff of comedy, not tragedy. And Da Ponte was no exception: The "stone guest" elements were exactly those with which he started when he reluctantly accepted the task of fashioning a libretto for Mozart.

The Marriage of Figaro, a hit at Prague's Italian theater, was still running early in 1787, and Mozart journeyed there to conduct and to bask in its success. The theater's impresario, Bondini, asked the composer for another opera like it, and when Mozart got back to Vienna he approached Figaro's librettist. It was a busy time for Da Ponte: he was taking a French libretto for a Salieri opera into Italian and working on an original libretto for Martín y Soler as well. But he suggested the Don Juan story and agreed to prepare it for a Prague premiere later that year, probably because he knew where he could find much of the work already done for him.

Da Ponte's source (thoroughly reworked) was a one-act opera with a libretto by Bertati and music by Gazzaniga, performed in Venice early in 1787. Though there is no record that *Don Giovanni Tenorio ossia Il Convitato di Pietro* was ever performed in Vienna, Da Ponte surely knew the libretto (and perhaps Mozart the score). Bertati's version contains the essentials of Da Ponte's opening scenes, certainly one of the most effectively constructed sequences in all of opera; after Donna Anna's insistence on vengeance for her murdered father, Da Ponte borrowed no more for the first act. In the second act, all is Da Ponte's invention until the graveyard scene and the final catastrophe.

Surely no cultural era can surpass our own in adulation of Mozart. But, whereas a similar bedazzlement on the part of the Romantics extended itself uncritically to Da Ponte as well, in our time the librettist has come in for criticism for his *Giovanni*. Unlike the

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sturdy and balanced structures for *Figaro* and *Così fan tutte*, the detractors assert, *Don Giovanni* sags in the middle. Much of what falls between the two pillars of the opening and closing sequences is static; in particular the end of the first act, with the three maskers showing up at Giovanni's palace and the second attempted seduction of Zerlina, seems—when divorced from the allure of Mozart's music—contrived and dramatically unconvincing.

But surely it must be conceded that, no matter what the overworked Da Ponte's failings, he gave the composer ample opportunity to portray character in music. And one of *Don Giovanni*'s most obvious dramaturgical weaknesses—the intrusion of solo arias at awkward and unlikely moments in the action—seems to have been more the composer's doing than the librettist's.

The circumstances surrounding the composition of *Don Giovanni* are somewhat murky, because neither Mozart nor Da Ponte left much behind in the way of details. But we do know that the process of what might be called the accumulation of the opera as we hear it began in Prague. The singer of the title role complained that his part was too short, and Mozart placated him with "*Deh vieni alla finestra*" in the second act. It was likewise with "*Non mi dir*" for the first Donna Anna. Then the opera was introduced to Vienna in 1788, and there the tenor singing Don Ottavio could not manage the passage work of "*Il mio tesoro*," so Mozart provided "*Dalla sua pace*"—but in the first act, not the second. And when the Elvira complained that she had insufficient opportunity to display her gifts, Mozart supplied "*In qual eccessi . . . Mi tradì*" for her.

So, except in the rare cases when an opera company's passion for historical rectitude prevails over tradition and audiences' insatiable appetite for Mozart's music, what operagoers get when they attend *Don Giovanni* is everything, strung together without regard for dramatic pace. And the matter is further complicated by the nature of the music. Da Ponte asserted after Mozart's death that the two engaged in a tug-of-war over the work, the librettist insisting that the *opera buffa* elements take precedence and the composer looking for the means to write music that shattered *buffa* conventions. Some of Mozart's most memorable passages, in fact—the dotted rhythms and wide leaps of Elvira's arias, the florid lines of Anna's "*Non mi dir*"—take the listener back to the world of Handel, Hasse and *opera seria*, in Mozart's time a style suffering badly from rigor mortis. For all its surefire histrionic moments and its matchless music, *Don Giovanni* is no easy work to sing, play and stage effectively.

It has been said of some authors that you can tell whose books they had been reading when they conceived certain of their own works. One possible explanation of Franco Zeffirelli's treatment of the final scenes of the Metropolitan Opera's new production of *Don Giovanni* is that he had just come off watching a string of George Lucas movies.

In the graveyard scene Giovanni and Leporello are surrounded by

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tombs and sepulchers adorned with a host of otherworldly creatures, including a representation of the Grim Reaper himself, that are grotesque but too patently bogus to be chilling. And in the climactic moments of the fatal supper, the Commendatore's living effigy advances on Giovanni while, at stage rear, the statue seen in the graveyard towers over all, his eyes flashing orange like those of a dime-store battery-powered Frankenstein. Worse yet, he drags Giovanni to perdition with the help of a swarm of vaguely disagreeable-looking fiends that would be hard put to frighten a ten-year-old.

It is hardly news that Mr. Zeffirelli, to whom the Met entrusted both the production and the set design of its first restaging of the opera in three decades, works in equal parts of gigantism and literalism; the Maurice Sendak strain, however, is something new. Elsewhere the familiar Zeffirelli is on view: he has raided the eighteenth century, magpie-like, for a Fragonard skyscape here, some elaborate grillwork there, massive pillars, a formal garden, what have you. Zeffirelli's unsparing hand seems determined to persuade us that, the old adage be damned, more is always really more. But it is one thing to smother a thin diversion like *Turandot*; it is quite another to lose the stark drive and fervid energy of *Don Giovanni* in a welter of silks and brocades, bonnets and pantaloons, leather and velvet, capes, candelabra, cartouches, fluted columns, panelled walls, gilt, garlands, ruffles and laces and shoes with silver buckles.

The decorative hyperbole of Zeffirelli the designer is matched by an analogous absence of discipline on the part of Zeffirelli the director. Throughout, the players move about the stage ceaselessly and pointlessly, substituting activity for action. Take a single example: Elvira roams around, fiddling constantly with her shawl, during Leporello's catalog aria, reacting over and over again in an almost identical way to Giovanni's licentiousness. Contrast this with a simple expedient recalled from a production of long ago: Elvira exits before the end of the aria, leaving Leporello to recount his master's conquests to thin air. The device is both a credible reaction by Elvira to the distressing and repetitious revelations and an underscoring of the almost solipsistic nature of Giovanni's pursuits. This is stagecraft; what Zeffirelli offers is staginess.

Well done, the music of *Don Giovanni* can redeem a presentation far more cumbersome than this one. But the musical results too were mixed. The orchestral playing had many virtues, including some splendid wind passages, but was sometimes ragged and sometimes out of phase with the vocalists. Conductor James Levine must have wanted a weighty and portentous sound from the pit, and often got it, as in the strong overture. But elsewhere the music's impact was blunted by tempos that were marginally too slow. In the first act, Elvira's aria "*Ah, fuggi il traditor*" and the quartet "*Non ti fidar*" suffered so; in the second act, Giovanni's aria "*Metà di voi*" did likewise, and the quintet "*Ferma, briccone*" as well—but at "*Mille torbidi pensieri*" in the latter, Levine accelerated to a pace that the singers could not manage.

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Another aspect of the production served to weaken its impact: it often spread into the recesses of the Met's huge stage, compromising the singers' projection out into the auditorium.

Samuel Ramey is a Giovanni celebrated worldwide, and he fills the bill in many ways. His voice encompasses the role nicely, though when the *tessitura* is high, as in the second-act serenade "*Deh vieni*," it can become hooty in sound and a bit unsteady. Where many another Giovanni has stumbled—most notably in the Champagne Aria—he rose to the occasion admirably. Still, hampered as he was by Zeffirelli's pedestrian direction, he rarely conveyed the magnetism or menace of the best Giovannis.

As Leporello, Ferruccio Furlanetto provided the evening's best vocal performance and most vivid characterization. He was funny but never silly, and his solid forward delivery got a lot of the text's bite across. Later in the production's spring run, he and Ramey took a cue from Da Ponte's libretto and switched roles, and a sampling of the broadcast suggested that Furlanetto's sharper and more characterful way with words imparted more energy to the opera's central figure. In the recitative, however, the contrast was less striking. Backed by excellent continuo playing—Daniel Beckwith on harpsichord, Jerry Grossman on cello and Laurence Glazener on bass—Ramey in particular made the recitative count dramatically.

Jerry Hadley sang Don Ottavio's two charming arias fluently, but did little to divest this role of its fatal theatrical superfluity. Philip Cokorinos was a decent, unexceptional Masetto, and Kurt Moll sang sonorously as the Commendatore.

The feminine side of the roster did not surmount the production's obstacles as successfully. It is facile to call Carol Vaness' voice too small for the role of Donna Anna; other singers have made a stronger impression with similar resources. Hers was accomplished singing, agile and secure, rising to the demanding moments with something to spare. But this role begs for light and shade, for suggestions of terror, rage, vulnerability and ambivalence. These Miss Vaness did not supply.

As Elvira, the Finnish soprano Karita Mattila made her Metropolitan debut. She showed a pleasing if not very distinctive voice with a tenuous lower range and a sometimes fragile top, and a hitch in vocal attack that could hinder thrust and forward motion. She is a handsome woman with good vocal and dramatic instincts, and might be heard to better advantage in a more lyrical role. Dawn Upshaw's Zerlina was a disappointment: prettily sung, it was oddly lacking in dramatic lift coming from a young American soprano who has made her mark by enlivening unusual corners of the repertoire. (A personal note: the fact that Miss Upshaw had become a mother just weeks before rehearsals started probably had a bearing on the matter.)

So what Levine and Zeffirelli produced last season is a capable but conventional and cluttered *Don Giovanni*. Once again the renegade has eluded capture.

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BERT CARDULLO

Saint Cinema

IT COULD BE SAID THAT THE TRUE SUBJECT of Jim Jarmusch's films—*Stranger than Paradise* (1984), *Down by Law* (1986), and now *Mystery Train*—is less the offbeat American landscape and the foreigners, figurative as well as literal, who inhabit it, than film-making itself, the sheer fashioning of motion pictures. Cubism was probably the first movement that made the person, setting, or object depicted a pretext for the artist's exploration of the geometry of form, and it wasn't long before artists were creating truly abstract art, art from which the recognizable world had been totally banished. Abstract cinema has been with us at least since the work of Hans Richter, Viking Eggeling, and Walter Ruttmann in the early 1920s, but, unlike abstract art, it has never gained a wide audience, most likely because film, which can move and talk, seems inextricably bound up with the human form and the thingness of this world—with the representation of physical reality—in a way that painting does not. Hence the divided impulse in a director like Jarmusch—and, most notably, in Godard before him—between abstraction and representation, between formalism and realism.

Both *Stranger than Paradise* and *Down by Law* were immediately stylized by their black-and-white cinematography in an age of living color, and each film had one foreigner among its three principal characters (not to mention a "foreign" title)—a foreigner whose very presence in an American film served to distance us somewhat from its already slim and elliptical narrative, because that presence was not "explained" as it would have been in a film of international intrigue or one about the immigrant experience in America. *Mystery Train* has three narrative strands—and strands is all they are—each of which is represented by one foreign country: the first strand, entitled "Far from Yokohama," follows a mod teenaged Japanese couple, Jun and Mitzuko, on their pilgrimage to Elvis Presley's shrines in Memphis, Sun Studio and Graceland; the second strand, "A Ghost," remains with a gentle young Italian widow, Louisa, waiting to ship her husband's body back to Rome; and the third, "Lost in Space," chronicles the frustration and anger of the surly Cockney Johnny at the loss of both his job (in a cotton warehouse) and his girlfriend. Jun and Mitzuko's presence in America is "explained," since they are tourists of a sort, but we never learn why Louisa or Johnny came to the States, or even how Louisa's husband died. The Dutchman Robby

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Müller's color cinematography doesn't help us much here, since it is no guide to characters' interior states or to the external scheme of things: that is, it is neither subjective nor symbolic. Müller, who photographed *Down by Law* and, prior to that, the films of Wim Wenders, has shot *Mystery Train* in color that is simply crisp, by sunlit day or neon-suffused night—so crisp, in fact, that it sometimes seems to exist purely as color, disconnected from concrete form.

Jarmusch's structural method in his third film[1] is itself a kind of abstraction or distillation, since he treats each of the three narrative strands separately, one after the other, even though they are all taking place more or less simultaneously. What unites them is the fact that each of the three strands passes through the same seedy hotel in downtown Memphis (and some of the same street locations on the way to that hotel) on the same night: after their visit to Sun Studio, Jun and Mitzuko spend the night there in Room 27; her flight to Rome delayed until the next day, Louisa checks into Room 25 with the indigent and garrulous Dee Dee, Johnny's estranged lover, whom she has just met and to whom she has generously offered shelter for the night (for unexplained reasons, Dee Dee "emigrated" some time ago from New Jersey to Memphis); and having shot the clerk of a liquor store for just two quarts of (bad) bourbon, Johnny holes up in Room 22 with his black co-worker, Will Robinson, and the whiny barber Charlie, Dee Dee's brother, also a transplanted New Jerseyite. Except at the very (anticlimactic) end, there is no cross-cutting among the three stories, which is how a conventional narrative filmmaker, interested in suspense and complication, would have proceeded. We know that they join up, in a sense, in the hotel because Mitzuko's sexual ecstasy, seen and heard in strand one, is heard through the wall in strand two by Louisa and Dee Dee; because Johnny's accidental shooting of Charlie in the leg, seen and heard in strand three, is heard in strands one and two; and because Tom Waits's boozy voice on the radio is heard in all three strands, announcing the end of Roy Orbison's song "Domino," the time—2:17 A.M., and the start of Elvis Presley's "Blue Moon" (Waits also played a disc jockey in *Down by Law*).

Additional continuity or connection among the three strands is provided by Elvis Presley, whose music we hear (in addition to "Blue Moon," he sings the version of "Mystery Train" that opens the film), whose first recording studio we visit, whose (tacky) portrait hangs in each of the hotel rooms, whose ghost Louisa sees, and by whose first name Johnny is called (much to his disgruntlement) by his black cohorts; by Dee Dee herself, whose brother and boyfriend appear in strand three and who, towards the end of the film, boards the same

[1] Actually his fourth, but I haven't seen *Permanent Vacation* (1980), the eighty-minute film he made before *Stranger than Paradise*, and to my knowledge it has never received wide distribution.

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Amtrak train as the Japanese couple, occupying the cabin next to theirs: she's now bound for Natchez, Mississippi, of all places, where she hopes to relocate with the help of a girlfriend who lives there, while Jun and Mitzuko are on their way to visit the home of Fats Domino in New Orleans; by the Memphis hotel's desk clerk and bellboy, who greet the representatives of each narrative strand with the same bemused impassivity; and by sounds and shots of passing trains, which open the film, punctuate its episodes, and close out the action (accompanied this time by Junior Parker's version of "Mystery Train").

I don't think that these "mystery trains" symbolize anything particularly momentous; rather, they seem to suggest sheer movement or passage through an otherwise static landscape, sheer linkage with the larger world outside. Jarmusch thus uses trains much the same way that the Japanese director Ozu did in a film like *Tokyo Story* (1953): as one representation of the physical world that surrounds his characters, sublimely indifferent to their needs and concerns, concerned only with its own continuation, its own microcosmic contribution to the macrocosmic order. Jarmusch's realistic shooting style, consisting of limited cutting within a scene and a camera that eschews the heat of the close-up for the repose of the medium-to-full shot, has a long tradition dating back to the brief flowering of a naturalistic cinema in southern Italy between 1913 and 1916. But his use of "cutaway" shots (to the Amtrak trains) and his repeated interjection of *temps mort*, or "dead time"—beginning a scene on an empty room or street, before the characters enter the frame, or holding the camera on a location after the characters have departed—appear to come from Ozu, all the more so since *Mystery Train* begins with the story of the two Japanese obsessed with American popular music (American influence on Japanese society was a frequent, if understated, theme in Ozu's postwar pictures). and since Jarmusch photographs them for extended periods of time in their hotel room from the position characteristically employed by Ozu: three or four feet off the floor (where the director has Jun and Mitzuko sit), the same position from which a person would view the scene if seated tranquilly on the traditional tatami mat.

Temps mort, like the cutaway, is the device of the realist filmmaker who seems compelled to remain in, or return to, the real world, the world momentarily bereft of his characters and their story. Thus both *temps mort* and the cutaway could be regarded as anti-fictional or anti-"action" devices, especially when coupled with the absence of cross-cutting among the three narrative strands in *Mystery Train*. Jarmusch, I take it, wants the fiction he has created to give up some of its screen-time to the world in which it is taking place, to the world from which it was in fact drawn, for the purpose of drawing attention to the mystery and inviolability of that world. Further, he wants to expose cross-cutting among stories taking place simultaneously as unrealistic, as directorial artifice contradicted by the law of nature that

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one cannot be in two places more or less at the same time. So, sensibly rejecting the prospect of a cubist film, which, instead of displaying several aspects of the same object simultaneously, like a cubist painting, would display several narrative strands simultaneously, without benefit of a split screen or a triptych (both of which, in effect, place cross-cut images before our eyes at the same exact time), Jarmusch lays each strand out for us, one after the other, in two-dimensional space, and it is up to us to lay them one on top of the other, in a single period of time.

Is *Mystery Train* anything more than an economical reflection on film form? Is there any thematic point to its three narrative strands, taken singly or as a whole? I think so, but one must proceed with caution here, for Jarmusch the writer works with as much understatement as Jarmusch the director. It seems clear that popular culture—popular because rooted finally in finance, in the marketability of each of its products—pervades the film, from the Elvis-idolatry practiced by the Japanese couple (an idolatry that nonetheless can make room for Carl Perkins and Roy Orbison) to the *absence* of television from the rooms in the downtown Memphis hotel—an absence frowned upon by Mitzuko, Dee Dee, and Charlie in succession. Popular magazines, snapshot photography, T-shirt as well as scrapbook art, popular music on the radio or on cassette: such are the means through which culture promulgates itself in *Mystery Train*. Only Louisa appears uninterested in, or unaffected by, this culture at the same time, paradoxically, as she becomes its prime dupe: at an all-night diner, she pays a man ten dollars for the Elvis-anecdote he has told her and ten dollars so that he will leave her alone; at a newsstand, she buys a load of magazines that she does not want just to put an end to the owner's hard sell, then gives most of the magazines and two hundred dollars in cash to someone who really wants them and can really use them—Dee Dee. Louisa's preferred reading is Ariosto's romantic epic *Orlando Furioso* (third and final edition, 1532), which she carries with her throughout the film and which, in its sprawling structure and thematic scope, stands in direct contrast to Jarmusch's minimalist *Mystery Train*.

There is no romance to speak of in *Mystery Train*, certainly nothing on the order of the love of Orlando, the greatest soldier in Charlemagne's Christian army, for Angelica, princess of Cathay! And whereas *Orlando Furioso*, like most of the great epics of the Renaissance, was a tale of a quest or crusade for honor and glory, truth and beauty, God and country, *Mystery Train* is a tale of Jun and Mitzuko's journey in search of "The King," Elvis Presley, and, indirectly, of three other journeys whose provenance remains a mystery: Louisa's, from Rome to Memphis; Johnny's, from England to America; and Dee Dee and Charlie's, from New Jersey to Tennessee.[2] It's possible

[2] Will Robinson has taken only imaginary journeys, as the title of his, Johnny's, and Charlie's episode, "Lost in Space," suggests. He did so by watching "Lost in Space," a

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that such a reduced structure and scope are Jarmusch's realistic response to the diminished and "unconnected" lives he finds around him in today's world. It's also possible that his emphasis, through *temps mort* and the cutaway, on the space that surrounds those lives is as much a metaphorical attempt to extend them, to expand their meaning beyond the confines of their own actions and interactions, as it is an attempt to redeem the integrity and permanence of the natural world. Ariosto himself was intent on recovering, or at least registering, that world, the world of true earthly paradise, in the face of the (necessary) vanities, delusions, and limitations of his otherwise heroic characters.

There's one familiar face, besides Tom Waits's voice, in *Mystery Train*: Nicoletta Braschi, who played the proprietress of Luigi's Tin Top Restaurant in *Down by Law*. Here she does less but implies more, has to imply more, like the rest of the actors (even if some of them are only implying vacuousness, which is not as easy to do as one would think), because there is no engrossing situation to amplify her character, as there was in the earlier film, let alone any fast-moving action to carry that character along or finely crafted dialogue to launch it. For an example of what I mean, look at the matter-of-factness of the expression on Braschi's face and the motion in her hands, the willowy matter-of-factness of her entire being, as she silently signs a number of papers—so many that the scene becomes wryly comic—before entrusting her husband's coffin to airline officials prior to its shipment home to Italy. Or watch the perplexed dutifulness of Youki Kudoh (Mitzuko) and the tetchy remoteness of Masatoshi Nagasi (Jun) as they listen uncomprehendingly to the patter of their Tennessean tour guide at Sun Studio and mirror her halting, pointless movement through the room where Elvis recorded for the first time in 1953. This scene, too, is wryly funny, as is the one in Will Robinson's truck after the shooting of the liquor-store attendant: Joe Strummer (Johnny), Steve Buscemi (Charlie), and Rick Aviles (Will) sit in the cab, driving around Memphis until approximately two in the morning, when they check into the run-down hotel. What in another movie would have turned into a suspenseful chase scene here becomes a tedious few hours of swigging bourbon on the road—hours condensed and punctuated by no fewer than four fades to black on the same shot of three men looking out into the night, bleary-eyed, closed-mouthed, and empty-headed. The comedy, of course, derives from the fact that nothing happens between those fades; the truth, from the fact that Strummer, Buscemi, and Aviles don't try to act anything more into the scene than is there. Such a scene may be Jarmusch's joke on its opposite number in an action-packed film, but

popular television series on CBS from 1965 to 1968, a kind of *Swiss Family Robinson* for the Space Age in which one of the characters, the son of the astrophysicist John Robinson and his biochemist wife Maureen, was named Will Robinson—a fact not lost on his namesake in *Mystery Train*.

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it is also his way of telling the unembellished truth about the lives his characters live. Similarly, Louisa's document-signing scene may be a send-up of its opposite number in the tear-jerker genre, and the Japanese couple's Sun-Studio tour a send-up of the system of star worship begun by the movies, but they are also attempts to depict the estranging, mechanical society in which these characters find themselves and to which they acquiesce. We may laugh at such scenes, but it's the laughter of recognition as much as derision, of self-implication as much as self-congratulation. The virtue of deadpan comedy like this is precisely that it gives us cause, and pause, to ask what in the world we're laughing at.

No such question is necessary as we laugh at Giuseppe Tornatore's *Cinema Paradiso*, since our laughter here is of an entirely different order: it is the laughter of affection and warmth, of loving acknowledgment of human foible and human quirk as they exist under the dispensation of Italian expansiveness. This is Tornatore's second feature film (I haven't seen his first, *The Professor* [1986]), but it might as well be his first, since in it he chronicles his love affair with the cinema from the time he was a boy growing up in the village of Giancaldo, Sicily. *Cinema Paradiso*, which Tornatore wrote as well as directed, immediately recalls Fellini's *Amarcord* (1973), and even uses one of the leads from that film (Pupella Maggio) in addition to one (Leopoldo Trieste) from Fellini's other somewhat autobiographical account of provincial life in his native Rimini, *I Vitelloni* (1953). But there are significant differences between *Cinema Paradiso* and *Amarcord* (local dialect for "I remember"), not least of which is the point at which each comes in its director's career.

Amarcord comes somewhat late in Fellini's career if, as I do, one regards his early films as his best and his last major work as *8½* (1963); as such it's a kind of taking stock, even regression, especially in the way it gratuitously underlines human grotesqueness and frailty. *Cinema Paradiso* is never guilty of this sin, even though Giancaldo is filled with as many "characters"—a village idiot, a stubborn Communist, a lone Neapolitan, a pompous bureaucrat—as Fellini's Rimini; Tornatore's film fairly brims with the humanity of a youthful director who knows he was made to exalt the human species on film. That humanity doesn't have to contend with the cloud of Fascism, since *Paradiso* takes place in the decade after the war, as remembered in the present by the successful filmmaker Salvatore Di Vita, who is on his way back to Giancaldo after an absence of thirty years. (Tornatore seems to exaggerate for effect the length of his alter ego's absence.) *Amarcord* takes place in the mid-1930s, when Fellini was a teenager, and it doesn't quite know what to make of Fascism—whether to caricature its adherents as petty, posturing powermongers, or to demonstrate the extent to which Fascism thrives among populations that have never grown out of adolescent ignorance, impressionability, and caprice.

Amarcord doesn't quite know what to make of Fascism because it

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doesn't quite know what to make of itself. Fellini's memories lack any organizing principle other than self-indulgence, and the result is therefore more an episodic valentine to the Felliniesque than a firm evocation of the era that fostered the director and gave him his vocation. There is a local cinema in *Amarcord*, but it is the source mainly of the fantasies of Gradisca, the town's femme fatale, not of Titta, the autobiographical young hero; and it must compete with other spectacles in Rimini, among them the Grand Hotel, the ocean liner *Rex* sailing past on the Adriatic (out of which image Fellini later tried to create an entire film, the unspeakably bad *And the Ship Sails On* [1983]), a Fascist parade celebrating the day of Rome's founding, and the racing cars of the Mille Miglia roaring through town. There is no competition for the local movie theater, Cinema Paradiso, in Tornatore's film, even after it burns down and its projectionist, Alfredo, gets blinded in the fire: a New Cinema Paradiso is built in its place, and the boy Salvatore Di Vita, known as Totò (also the name of Italy's most famous comic actor, one of whose movies is a big hit at the Paradiso), takes the place of his mentor Alfredo in the projection booth.

Cinema Paradiso is organized around the frequent trips of the citizens of Giancaldo, "characters" included, to the movies, where Totò joins them, usually from the projection booth with his pal Alfredo. These movies are important not only because they inspired Totò/Tornatore to become a filmmaker himself, but also because their home, the Cinema Paradiso, is a communal force in the village, a place where people come to dream, to worship, and to fraternize. When they are there, it is as if they are in paradise, relieved of the burden of their hard lives and blissfully free to look at the stars, to observe the mystery of a different kind of transubstantiation: that of celluloid and light into moving pictures. This is the mystery that fascinates Totò, and it is why he so much likes being in the booth, where he can be present at the dispensing of communion if not yet at the creation of cinematic life itself. To be sure, the Catholic Church is still a force to be reckoned with in Giancaldo—we see the villagers at confession, at mass, and at funerals, and Totò himself is an altar boy to the vigilant Father Adelfio—but the Church must be content to attract believers with the promise of salvation in the hereafter, whereas the cinema can lure them with the guarantee of salvation from the here and now. For all their ostensible conflict, the two faiths manage to exist side by side, with Father Adelfio making sure, with his censor's scissors, that his parishioners don't get too much gratification out of the Cinema Paradiso's regular offerings.

Those offerings have stopped by the time the older Totò returns to Giancaldo from Rome. He has come to attend the funeral of his friend and father-substitute, Alfredo (Totò's own father was killed in Russia during the war), but he also happens to witness the demolition of the Paradiso of his youth, which has finally given way to the television-and-video revolution (and which lately had resorted to showing erotic films in order to attract customers) and will now make

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way for a parking lot in the newly traffic-clogged Giancaldo. In between Totò's learning of Alfredo's death and his arrival home by plane, we witness his memories of the past, of the colorful little town in which he grew up, of days and nights spent at his beloved Cinema Paradiso, and of time shared with his equally beloved Alfredo, who urged him, as a young man, to leave the place of his birth lest he never amount to anything. "You have to go away a long time before you can come back and find your land, your people," the blind Alfredo counseled Totò on a beach strewn with abandoned anchors photographed to look like crosses, and he stayed away for thirty years (in that time he saw his mother and younger sister, but only when they traveled to Rome). What Alfredo meant was that Totò had to give up something in order to get something: had to give up the community of tiny Giancaldo for the individual achievement of a career in the wide world, and had to leave the village, paradoxically, in order to find the village, to appreciate its homey virtues and to discover the extent of its benign influence on him.

That influence, unfortunately, never extended to Totò's creation of a communal life for himself outside Giancaldo. He has gone through one woman after another without marrying ever since his first love, Elena, left Giancaldo to attend college in Palermo, and we last see him sitting alone in a sleek screening room back in Rome, watching Alfredo's compilation of the many kisses and embraces that Father Adelfio had excised from films during the period of strict Church censorship. This scene is funny—like Totò, we remember the priest's zealous campaign to remove "pornography" from the movies—but it is also sad, since we realize that the man who spliced the excised bits of film together is now dead, and since we realize as well that what we have been witnessing is a kind of summary of Totò's superficial love life. Celibate Totò obviously is not, but religiously devoted to his calling, his medium, he is. To what extent that medium will survive the cable-and-video or home-entertainment revolution as a means of creating some semblance of public communion among citizens, is a question that Tornatore leaves us to ponder.

Cinema Paradiso, then, is a paean to the cinema at the same time that it is an elegy for the cinema, a bittersweet film whose bittersweetness is underscored by Ennio Morricone's music, which neatly combines the pensive with the buoyant, and Blasco Guirato's cinematography, which consistently bathes its earthen palette now in the bright sun of day, now in the golden glow of twilight. When Guirato moves his camera, he does so in ways that suggest the movement of memory, as in the beautiful opening shot of a tranquil sea in the background and a potted plant atop a white wall in the foreground, framed by gently blowing, gossamer curtains, from which the camera pulls back to discover an additional frame of windows on either side of an open door, then pulls back farther to reveal a bowl of fruit on a table. Into this still life of sorts steps Totò's mother, in whose dining-room-adjoined-by-a-sun-porch we are, in a present that adumbrates for us

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the movement of Totò/Tornatore's mind's eye as it will seek in the course of the film to retrieve and reanimate the past.

Conversely, the camera will sometimes track in toward a character or out over the town square, as if to fix that character as firmly as possible, or to encompass that square to the fullest, in Totò/Tornatore's mind's eye. For example: the scene in which Alfredo advises the teenaged Totò about how to win the love of the lovely new girl in town, Elena Mendola. The scene begins with a long shot of Alfredo and Totò framed by the doorway in which they are sitting; then the camera slowly tracks in on Alfredo as he relates his parable of the princess and the common soldier; when it finally gets close enough to embrace him and he gets to the end of his story, there's a quick cut to the side, to Alfredo's right profile, that brings Totò into the picture once again as he questions the inconclusiveness of his mentor's tale. Like many moments in *Cinema Paradiso*, this is a seriocomic one, one whose seriousness, if not sentimentality, is undercut or leavened by its comedy, whose poignance is counterbalanced by its verve.[3] Alfredo's story doesn't have a real ending—we never find out if the soldier finally wins the princess' heart after ninety-nine days and nights of waiting in all types of weather for her to respond to him from her balcony. When asked by Totò what happened at the end, Alfredo snaps, "That *is* the end! Don't ask me what it means." This is funny because it's the last answer we expect from this storyteller, who has been in the habit of quoting aphorisms to Totò from famous motion pictures, and who could easily supply the requisite happy ending from which an easy moral could be drawn. But Alfredo's non-ending to his story is sadly prophetic as well as funny, for Totò's own relationship with Elena will end on a note of irresolution when he departs for military service in Rome and she for college in Palermo: still in love upon their separation, they somehow never see each other again.

The teenager who plays Totò in love, Marco Leonardi, is the weakest actor in the film—earnest but wooden (and physically wrong) by comparison with the wiry, devilishly appealing Salvatore Cascio, who plays Totò as a boy. Jacques Perrin is physically right as Totò the grown man, but his performance is only slightly more than adequate. For his part Philippe Noiret, well-dubbed in Sicilian, is superb as Alfredo: loving, patient, exasperated, pathetic, knowing in his dealings with his apprentice-cum-menace. Like *Cinema Paradiso* as a whole, Totò and Alfredo's relationship transcends mere sentiment to become a species of human truth, movingly remembered, elegantly adorned, and thoughtfully propounded.

[3] We see this same division between, as opposed to within, the films shown at the Cinema Paradiso: on one bill Luchino Visconti's tragedy of Sicilian fishermen, *The Earth Trembles* (1948), is followed by the Keystone short *The Knockout* (1914), with Charlie Chaplin and Fatty Arbuckle; one night Pietro Germi's *In the Name of the Law*, or *Mafia* (1949), is playing, the next night a comedy starring Totò.

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WILLIAM H. PRITCHARD

Novel Reports

TEN YEARS AGO, IN THE OPENING PARAGRAPH of a fiction chronicle for this magazine, Joseph Epstein declared that he would not review new novels by John Barth, James Baldwin, and Norman Mailer because—in three words—they were "too damn long." At the time I thought it somewhat cavalier of Mr. Epstein to proceed (or not proceed) in such a manner. But when *The Quincunx* (weight three pounds, 781 thickly-worded pages) written by one "Charles Palliser, a graduate of Oxford" was dumped in my lap, I decided it was time to invoke Epstein's principle. The book was just too damn long, even though it purported to give us the lowdown on "the violent and corrupt London underworld of the Late Regency." Since I had a respectable number of other thick volumes to peruse, my conscience was assuaged, and here follow some reports on the books I actually read.

Well, maybe not in one case actually *read*, since Erica Jong demands something beyond mere reading.[1] Language is surely inadequate to convey the truth about her heroine's lover, "Dart," since the truth is pretty sizzling stuff:

> Who can describe lust when it is this hot, this succulent, this compelling? Words cannot touch it. Perhaps only music can echo the swell and heft of it, the heat, the vibration.

Perhaps, and we soon get down to rich poetry about "the curved shaft of his cock corresponding to the bent desire that drives me," and high-level dialogue like " 'Witch,' he hisses. 'My man, my fit, my mate,' I moan." The pathos of it all is that the composer of such lyric vibrations isn't content merely to have written a ten-million-copy bestseller (*Fear of Flying*) but wants to pass as a serious artist. And of course the monkeyshines of her latest production suggest the utter improbability of such a notion.

On the positive side, Erica Jongs along for only 362 pages; her English elders and betters, P. D. James and Iris Murdoch, go on for considerably longer, and since Knopf and Viking, like most American publishers, insist on manufacturing the largest possible physical mass for their product, these novels wound any bodily part on which they

[1] ANY WOMAN'S BLUES, by *Erica Jong*. Harper & Row. $18.95.

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happen to rest.[2] (Why can't we produce, like the English, less giant-sized packages? Too big a country?) I suppose the physical size is appropriate for the panoramic effect P. D. James strives for in her latest, which—like its predecessor *A Taste for Death*—has a large gallery of characters and is leisured and ample in its treatment of place (this time the Norfolk coast rather than—except for a bit at the outset—London). *Devices and Desires* is also typographically grandiose: six books and an epilogue, each one scrupulously dated on the prefatory page—it's as if someone is working to assure us this is no mere thriller. Indeed, as James has demonstrated in the past, she is an efficient, thoroughly capable prose writer, with patience and knowledge enough to make fully convincing Alice Mair's kitchen at Larksoken where Adam Dalgliesh (the police inspector, also a published poet) has brought the proofs of Alice's latest cookery book:

> The right-hand half of the room was a well-equipped kitchen with a large gas stove and an aga, a butcher's chopping block, a dresser to the right of the door holding an assortment of gleaming pots, and a long working surface with a wooden triangle sheathing her assortment of knives. . . . The room, which contained nothing superfluous, nothing pretentious, was both pleasing and extraordinarily comforting and, for a moment, he wondered why. Was it the faint smell of herbs and newly baked dough: the soft ticking of the wall-mounted clock, which seemed both to mark the passing seconds and yet to hold them in thrall; the rhythmic moaning of the sea through the half-open door; the sense of well-fed ease conveyed by the two cushioned armchairs, the open hearth?

All of the above, but mostly P.D. James's authoritative and hospitable manner with sentences. Paragraph by paragraph the book is intelligent and engaging, the writer masterly at spinning out and prolonging an action. But when you've finished, there's a question about the value of what you've taken in and why it's been so prolonged: like a Chinese dinner, agreeable as eaten but leaving not a rack behind. It's perfect for the reading audience that, at the moment, has kept it on the bestseller list for sixteen weeks: not too demanding, never preverse or pretentious (although I don't believe for a minute in the policeman's poetry), serious about itself as an invented tale. Yet somehow dead at the center, and I much preferred the psychological acumen and concentrated terror of James's earlier *Innocent Blood* (1980).

Once more it is time to consider Dame Iris Murdoch, now turned seventy and, counting the new one, the author of twenty-four novels. I went through the titles and found I had read twenty of them, even reread the first five. Some, like *The Sandcastle* or *A Severed Head* or *The*

[2] DEVICES AND DESIRES, by *P. D. James*. Alfred A. Knopf. $19.95. THE MESSAGE TO THE PLANET, by *Iris Murdoch*. Viking. $22.95.

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Sea, The Sea hang around in the memory; some, like *The Time of the Angels* or *The Black Prince*, I can't remember anything about; even some I've reviewed, like *A Fairly Honourable Defeat* or *Henry and Cato*, are now a good deal less than vivid. Of course it is not easy (with one's imperfect skills) to keep sorted out the products of a busy novelist; but there is also, with Murdoch, the nagging possibility that any of her characters could be substituted for any other—change the setting a bit and nothing much has been gained or lost. Lately (beginning with *The Philosopher's Pupil* which I slogged through, and *The Good Apprentice* and *The Book of the Brotherhood*, which I skipped) her books have grown ever more swollen. The new one has, again, a philosopher and his pupil at the center of things: Alfred Ludens, an academic historian, is convinced that his mentor, Marcus Vallar, is in possession of big secrets, perhaps *the* big secret (message-to-the-planet-like) of the universe. Ludens wants to locate Marcus in some secure, untroubled spot where he'll be able to write down the wisdom he has to communicate. Much of the novel is taken up with Ludens tracking Marcus down, bringing him and his daughter Irina to the bedside of a seemingly dying Irish poet whom Marcus appears to heal; after which Marcus, accompanied by Irina and Ludens (engaged in some sort of unlikely romance) goes to live in a sanatorium near Salisbury Plain where various odd things happen. A large cast of characters moves in and out of the action; there are the usual Murdochian erotic entanglements (Jack is married to Franca but also in love with Alison etc.) and the dust jacket tries to pique curiosity: "Is Marcus a genius? A saint? A religious warrior? Or just a madman? Is he good or evil? Can he raise a man from the dead?" Do we care?

There is also a good deal of brow-furrowing discourse about The Holocaust. But Marcus' daughter puts it perfectly well early in the book when she says dismissively about her father that "Well, he did visit Auschwitz and distinguished himself by fainting. He should have remembered he was just a tourist. And he went to India to look at all the suffering on show there, perhaps he thought *they* would see that he was really a god, but all he got was hepatitis." Unfortunately, Irina's debunking words are not the last, since the book is only beginning to get into its stride. Five hundred pages later we are no further along, in any satisfying sense I could make out. Iris Murdoch has been praised as a comic novelist and she had some claim to the title when writing books like *The Flight from the Enchanter* or *A Severed Head*. But surely a good comic novelist (Evelyn Waugh, say) should make us laugh now and then. I was delighted by one moment in *The Message to the Planet* when Ludens, searching for Marcus, comes upon a notice that reads "FREE BICYCLES" and speculates: "Free bicycles? Unwanted bicycles offered gratis? Bicycles released to wander like free-range hens? Or a protest: unjust to bicycles, bicycles lib?" More of that sort of thing would be in order in a novel that suffers from both solemnity and elephantiasis.

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I wanted to like Ann Beattie's novel since it was advertised as both more human and more formally ambitious than her made-to-order stories (some of which stay in the memory) and her previous novels—of which *Falling in Place*, with its monstrous adolescent John Joel, is perhaps the most telling.[3] But alas, *Picturing Will*, which begins intelligently enough, grows ever more random, trivial, and maddeningly unfocused. The opening segment has affecting moments: a young mother, Jody, and her child, Will, live together in Charlottesville (as does Ann Beattie), having been deserted by Will's irresponsible father, Wayne. But the moments don't last: Jody becomes a photographer and hooks into the New York art scene through an entrepreneur named Haveabud. The latter is a wholly repulsive character (though Beattie doesn't seem to mind him) and as the book proceeds to leave Jody and follow Haveabud's journey—with Will and another young boy—to Will's father in Florida, things really come undone. (There is an especially unpleasant bit of sexual inversion involving Haveabud and the boy, with Will as a witness.) Nor is the book held together by interspersed passages in italics emanating from an unnamed voice, portentous and boring in its heard-before sentiments:

> You have created the child, but you could not have anticipated the child's power. Because the child's presence and desires are so constant, it becomes the course of least possible pain to persuade yourself that being subsumed is synonymous with parenthood. You can only pray that by early evening the child's eyelids will grow heavy with sleep. Then you hope that the sleeping child will not loom large in your own dreams, that once the night-light has been switched on, that beam of light alone may guide the child to dreamland.

I was unmoved by Beattie's lyricism; in fact as I tried to take seriously this unmoored sensibility, I yearned for large doses of Anthony Trollope. Like it or not—and some do not—Ann Beattie's gift is for the deadpan, flatly stated treatment of scene and character. *Picturing Will* attempts to go deeper into both scene and character, and the result is unhappy.

An altogether happier, though far less touted piece of writing, is Linda Grace Hoyer's 109-page book about growing old, living alone on a farm in Pennsylvania, and being the mother of a famous son.[4] The son, a successful book illustrator named Christopher—is, as in Hoyer's earlier *The Enchantment*—a barely disguised John Updike, and in these slight but telling stories (hardly even "stories," they are

[3] PICTURING WILL, by *Ann Beattie*. Random House. $18.95.
[4] THE PREDATOR, by *Linda Grace Hoyer*. Ticknor & Fields. $15.95.

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more like meditative sketches in various directions) we see the widowed Ada going about her daily tasks, dealing with the attempted kindnesses of other people, entertaining a visit from her son and grandchildren, or talking to the son on the phone. I suppose that what's most affecting about the book is its tone, ruefully accepting, but not without misgivings, the indignities of aging. Looking at herself in the bathroom mirror, Ada sees "the look of a person who, although obviously of less use than she formerly was, continued to expect well of the future." The little twist on that sentence is characteristic of her writing throughout the book, as in this exchange with the doctor:

> "Will you put me to sleep—when I become too troublesome?"
> "No," Dr. Mordecai said, "I don't do that."
> "You could be one of the licensed criminals that my father said all doctors are."
> "Some are. Not all."
> "If I choose a predator to end my life, I'd prefer it to be you."
> "I'm going to help you do the things you want to do. What has become of the other doctors you've known?"
> "I've survived them."

The book is filled with originally-turned observations: " 'Boys will be boys,' the old folks said when she was a child. And Ada, hearing them, had not, for a moment, doubted it. What girls would be was, it seemed, a matter of either conjecture or unspeakable concern to their parents. Otherwise, the old folks would have said, 'Girls will be girls.' " But such remarks are subordinate, overall, to a delicately achieved realism of treatment:

> In the afternoon the sky was clear, as it had been at dawn. Flowers of the field that all through the summer had bowed whenever the mower came close to them now waited stiffly to be cut down. The summer was gone and the winter coming. The chill breeze still penetrated her woollen shirt. She was an old woman. . .

While reading this lovely book I thought more than once of the final stanza of Frost's "Reluctance":

> Ah, when to the heart of man
> Was it ever less than a treason
> To go with the drift of things,
> To yield with a grace to reason,
> And bow and accept the end
> Of a love or a season.

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Linda Grace Hoyer died at age 85, just before *The Predator* was published.

Gore Vidal and George V. Higgins have a couple of things in common: expert entertainers both, they can be counted on to market the most dependable sort of product; they are also humorists (of a fairly dark sort), a claim not to be made for the novelists considered thus far.[5] I have come late to Vidal's novelized histories of America, having just last fall read the impressive *Lincoln*. *Hollywood*, which treats the administration of Woodrow Wilson, the movie industry, and Warren Harding's accession, is filled with the things Vidal does best, like putting Henry Adams and Alice Roosevelt Longworth together in a conversation in which George Santayana, among others, is discussed; or letting Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin talk it up about United Artists in a steam bath (no mention of Santayana). As to be expected from Vidal, there are many shrewd things about the movies, and his portraits of both Wilson and Harding are first rate (although to my ears Wilson, in his wry wit, sounded a bit too much like Lincoln). It's not exactly a seamless read—some of the transitions feel a shade abrupt—but there is no question that Vidal is up to a remarkable feat of composition in the now six books that compose his American chronicle.

Over the past two decades, George V. Higgins has been writing another sort of American chronicle, this one located in that inglorious corner of Massachusetts southeast of Boston. (There are occasional forays into New Hampshire or Springfield or even New York City.) In *Wonderful Years, Wonderful Years* (1988) and in the new book, Higgins has cut down the narrative sprawl which taxed his most faithful readers' patience in *Impostors* and *Outlaws*, into trim narratives of 200-odd pages. *Trust* is beautifully engineered, with not a bit of trust in it. Its fine slob of a hero, Earl Beale, is a one-time basketball star who has done prison time for contriving to fix games. Thanks to an intercession by someone with clout, he was sprung early; now it's time to return the favor, says a man named Battles who has a Mercedes he wants Earl to make disappear. Battles explains it thus to Earl:

> "You got in the shit once. And *you* needed a favor. And you got it from the guy that knows your brother, all right? Now, the guy that called your brother, he owed *me* a favor. Because I did him a favor when a friend of *his* got dirty. So that is why you're down here, pal—because *you* need a favor. You got to pay things back."

All clear? The novel thus launched is always similarly and delightfully knotted; to keep up with it, more or less, is—as always in reading

[5] HOLLYWOOD, by *Gore Vidal*. Random House. $19.95. TRUST, by *George V. Higgins*. Henry Holt & Co. $18.95.

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Higgins—a satisfying test of readerly agility. Along the way we tap into the usual rich and richly-sounded store of Higginsish folk wisdom, as when a character named Waldo reminds Earl Beale why he (Earl) has to work the late shift at the used car lot on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving:

> "I know there isn't much business, some nights when we stay open late. But you never can tell, when impulse'll hit 'em, and those're the easiest sells. They get themselves a few beers, have something to eat, and all of a sudden they're hot to trot. Who knows what happens, that starts it? The old buggy wouldn't start without a jump, they went out to go to work inna morning? Their lousy fuckin' brother-in-law just got himself a new one and's rubbing their noses in it? There was a little snow, the ground, if it's wintertime, and they got stuck, their own driveways, and said: 'Screw it, I'm not getting new tires for this junker'? Or it's in the summer and the junker boiled over? Who the hell knows, sets them off? But it happens, and when it happens, well, they got to get a car *tonight*."

Earl, unimpressed with what Waldo calls such "gravy commissions," strikes back by insisting that he never gets any gravy:

> "And I'm never gonna, either, long's the nights they give me're just before some holiday, three-day weekend or like that. Now you just look at me working till nine tonight. Nobody's gonna come in. You know where they're all gonna be? Down at the super, getting their turkeys, buying their veggies and ice cream. Stop-and-Shop and Star'll sell three trainloads of cranberries, and I won't sell any cars. Sit around on my ass all night, waiting for something, come in."

This sort of exchange is what fuels the pages and keeps you interested in a quite squalid world of sharks and fish. Higgins has not done it anywhere any better than in *Trust*, but only people who read with their ears as well as eyes will appreciate him.

The same might be said, even more decidedly, about Philip Roth's latest, fiendishly clever piece of work.[6] In its penultimate chapter, the protagonist, a novelist named Philip, insists—countering his wife's charges—that the lover with whom he's been intimately talking to throughout the novel we've nearly finished, is an imaginative creation, not a real woman: "I refuse to remind you that the sounds people make hold a certain appeal for me . . . I have imagined a love affair—I do it all the time. Not the way most men ordinarily do, while clutching at their dicks, but because this is my *work*." If you think that's the

[6] DECEPTION, by *Philip Roth*. Simon & Schuster. $18.95.

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truth, once and for all, you've underestimated Roth's slipperiness. There is no secure vantage point from which to understand anything in the book, since its "action" consists wholly of conversation (and with no narrator to name and place the conversers) whose content is always ambiguous and tricky:

> "You're not saying much. You hardly do, you know, when I'm here."
>
> "I'm listening. I listen. I'm an écouteur—an audiophiliac. I'm a talk fetishist."
>
> "Ummm. It *is* erotic, you just sitting here listening."

It's also a test of the reader's mettle, and *Deception* (the perfect title) absolutely needs to be reread to come into focus.

In a recent interview, Roth put forward the notion of art as impersonation: "Making fake biography, false history, concocting a half-imaginary existence out of the actual drama of my life *is* my life." In the new book's final chapter "Philip" tells his imaginary or real lover that "it's play, it's a game. Me *ventriloquizing* myself." Roth's last novel, *The Counterlife*, was a densely intricate one, rich in narrative presence and filled—maybe even overfilled—with detail, setting, sensation. All of which, in *Deception*, is trimmed away, abstracted, made purely a matter of something to listen to—the reader as audiophiliac. It's an amazing feat, though something to be done once only, and a book that will fully engage only readers like myself who find *Zuckerman Bound* and *The Counterlife* Roth's best work. Probably, though, we shouldn't be at all surprised at Roth's aural sex (Hermione Lee's fine phrase for it), since for a long time now he's invented the purest speech, the most convincing cadences, of any American novelist. *Deception* isn't a book to love, but certainly to be admired.

This chronicle ends with the briefest of reports on two wild and crazy guys, Thomas Pynchon and Martin Amis.[7] *Vineland* has its ups and downs, moments of fine inventiveness and others in which Pynchon seems to be flogging his material. As I followed the antics of Zoyd Wheeler, Frenesi Gates, the Thanatoids, and observed things around the Bodhi Dharma Pizza Temple, I had a weird sense of remoteness from the book I was reading, this long-awaited successor to *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973). One reviewer of *Vineland*, William Vesterman, neatly defined the cultural dynamics of this situation, when he noted that, almost thirty years after the shock of *V*, "The audience Pynchon achieved in the meantime has increasingly pressured him to go wild in the same good old ways it has learned to love, analyze, and 'understand.' And why not a bit more often, if you don't mind, you

[7] VINELAND, by *Thomas Pynchon*. Little, Brown. $19.95. LONDON FIELDS, by *Martin Amis*. Harmony Books. $19.95.

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delightful zany with the truly talented and serious side—'Give us another song, Craze!' " Somehow, with *Vineland*, much of the surprise, the enlivening dislocations which made Pynchon exciting to read, have vanished. It's a thoroughly professional performance, and twenty-five years of Pynchon Criticism mounted by academic guns has shown us how to take it in and talk about it. However one judges the work of novelists like Mailer or Updike or Roth, they have kept themselves in front of us, kept working out their obsessions in a continuing series of books. In the case of Pynchon, The Invisible Novelist, we don't have any comparably revealed "self" to care about, so when suddenly, with *Vineland*, it's showtime again, one may be missing the beat. Still, only Pynchon, who in *Gravity's Rainbow* gave Tyrone Slothrop a "hardon," could give one of the characters in *Vineland* a "softoff."

Martin Amis has pulled out all the stops, intent on writing the apocalyptic satire of our fin de siècle: "maybe love can't bear it either, and flees all planets when they reach this condition, when they get to the end of their twentieth centuries." Maybe not, too. As an attempt to think darkly about the millennium, nuclear annihilation, the planet running down, *London Fields* can't be taken seriously. But young Amis, who has always loved to rub his own and our noses in it (with indifferent results in previous books) manages here some very funny, usually scatologically-directed routines, propelled by a resourceful if headlong verbal imagination (the book never uses one word where ten will do). A single example in which Guy and Hope Clinch discuss the awful behavior of their impossible child, Marmaduke, a terror to his nannies and a special torturer of his father. Briefly they consider the possibility of having a second child:

> "What if it's just like Marmaduke?" said Hope.
> "Don't *say* that. My God, what's he doing now?"
> "He's trying to make himself sick."
> "But he's got his whole fist down there."
> "He won't manage it." Guy looked at Hope—surprised, heartened.
> "He threw up his tea long ago. And his milk and cookies. His only hope now is with the phlegm."
> "He wasn't sick after lunch. Can't bear that noise. Or was he?"
> "Yeah—he slimed Melba. Then he bit Phoenix on the tongue. Quite far back. I hope she wasn't letting him French-kiss her again."

That should do to convey the spirit of this nastily invigorating book. Wonderfully funny things on individual pages—but there are 470 of the latter. *London Fields*, rather touchingly, is dedicated, "To my father." What did Kingsley say in response?

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JAY PARINI

Reading Starobinski Reading

> Object and subject, for Husserl as for the English philosopher F.H. Bradley, who influenced T.S. Eliot, are really two sides of the same coin.
>
> —Terry Eagleton

> The hidden is the other side of a presence.
>
> —Jean Starobinski

JEAN STAROBINSKI OF GENEVA, SWITZERLAND must be counted among the leading theoretical critics of this century, and the recent translation of *The Living Eye*[1] is long overdue. *L'Oeil vivant* in fact appeared in 1961; what now falls under that title is really a selection of essays from that volume with the addition of other essays from a volume called *La Relation critique* (1970). *The Living Eye* offers an ideal introduction to this highly readable and always provocative thinker, who has long been associated with the Geneva school of critics, a group whose guru was the Belgian critic, Georges Poulet. Starobinski, who is Professor Emeritus of the University of Geneva, was—like his countryman Jean Rousset or French critic Jean-Pierre Richard—deeply influenced by Husserl and phenomenology. (Poulet himself has consistently refused to be linked directly to Husserl—even though the influence is evident.)

Phenomenological criticism is marked by the application of certain methods used by Edmund Husserl, the German philosopher, to literary criticism. Husserl was famous for "bracketing" those aspects of reality that could not be focused on in any concrete way. Whatever lay beyond the bounds of sensory experience was systematically excluded from the critic, though "sensory" here was given a loose interpretation. If you thought something, it was "sensed." The critic's main task became the attempt to isolate a particular form of "consciousness." As with the New Critics, the only data available to the critic was the "immanent" material of the text.

Husserl, whose major writings date from the twenties and thirties, reminds one (though the comparison fades under close scrutiny) of the British positivists in his efforts to limit the possibilities of consciousness. This radical system of reduction has its problems, of

[1] THE LIVING EYE, by *Jean Starobinski*. Trans. by *Arthur Goldhammer*. Harvard University Press. $29.50.

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course; one is reminded of the child who puts his hands over his eyes to make the disapproving parent disappear. In Husserl's case, the philosopher decided to make do with the apparent contents of a given mind, which often amounts to nothing more than a random flux of "phenomena." According to his method, the next step was to find out what aspects of these phenomena were beyond reduction: that is, where the *essences* lay. The object of this exercise was to grasp whatever was unchanging, fixed, "pure," in any given thing—its *eidos*, as Husserl called it, referring to the Greek word for type.

This approach sounds airy and horribly abstract but, in practice, the phenomenological method signaled a return to concreteness. (If one compares phenomenology to the neo-Hegelianism popular at the beginning of this century, one quickly understands why Husserl suddenly appeared so "down to earth.") By hanging on to whatever knowledge was experientially reliable, Husserl and his followers attempted to construct a "science of science," a way of knowledge that was not intellectually top-heavy with abstraction.

An aspect of Husserl's method of great interest to literary critics was its attitude toward the old antithesis of appearance and reality. Jean Starobinski, especially, has made this dialectic the center of his critical enterprise. In retracing the origins of his work in *The Living Eye*, he points to the anxiety raised during the Second World War by "fanaticism in uniform whose irrational imperatives had unleashed a worldwide conflict, and to the astonishment [he] felt at the seductive power exerted by leaders whose 'charisma' stemmed essentially from their knowing how to make use of a certain kind of mask." His critical drive was centered on the desire, seen in these essays, to examine the various traditions of the theme of "appearance and reality."

In the first essay in this volume, "Poppaea's Veil," he writes cleanly in the phenomenological tradition when he tries to show that the appearance/reality or being/appearing (*être/paraître*) dichotomies are merely rhetorical oppositions. Appearance, he suggests, cannot be separated from its verbal and gestural uses (lying, hypocrisy, dissimulation, mask); it is linked to all manifestations of being. As the title of this volume indicates, Starobinski is obsessed with the visual level of representation, with what he repeatedly calls "the gaze," what elsewhere he refers to as "the dramaturgy of optical relations." In his introduction to *The Living Eye*, he elaborates: "In literary works . . . preverbal relations are interpreted, imagined, and shaped by means of language. They belong (or seem to belong) to a world prior to that of the written text that evokes them. With respect to them the text functions as a metalanguage. It causes them to live, it revives them, in a *different* system of relations."

So where does that leave the critical text? Is it, then, a meta-metalanguage, involved in a kind of infinite recession like a hall of mirrors? Starobinski never answers this question satisfactorily. He does, however, define the critic's relation to the text toward the end of

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"Poppaea's Veil," suggesting that the critic "is a person who, while consenting to the fascination of the text, nevertheless seeks to maintain his *right of scrutiny*. He desires greater penetration: beyond the manifest sense that is revealed, he perceives a latent significance." As ever, Starobinski returns to the notion of the gaze, a gaze which can be intimate—as in the New Criticism, with its emphasis on minute analysis of a given text—or panoramic, embracing correlative facts of the author's life or historical context. So the text at hand is exposed to interrogation, but—here is the interesting twist—so is the critic; the critic is taken apart, exposed: the rhetoric of the text is allowed to work its magic. "Before speaking for ourselves, we must lend our voice to the strange power that seeks us out."

There follow several brilliantly self-exposed and interrogating essays on Rousseau, Stendhal, Shakespeare, Freud, and others. But it is Rousseau who, decade after decade, has most engaged Starobinski. Examining a wide range of texts, from the *Social Contract* and *Emile* to the *Confessions* and *Dialogues*, he discerns Rousseau's "strange hybrid of sacred history and personal myth." As always, he is obsessed with the critical gaze, and the returned gaze of the text upon the critic. "What idea lies beyond the gaze directed toward him? Does the person wish him good or ill?" In essence, Starobinski demonstrates the degree to which Rousseau's theoretical constructs (of the ideal state, the nature world) were projections: Narcissus-like reflections of the necessarily subjective imagination.

The history of philosophical discourse on the idea of reflection is rich, of course, extending from Plato to Richard Rorty; Starobinski is aware of this tradition, and he alludes to it explicitly and implicitly, giving this essay in particular a firm resonance. Rousseau, for instance, was hell-bent on self-knowledge, which he understood as both a self-alienation in which the ego becomes a stranger to itself in order to know itself objectively, and a self-immersion, a kind of total solipsism where no divisions of consciousness can distort the individual's unity of being. This was, alas, a form of *hubris* on Rousseau's part, as Starobinski notes by alluding to Sartre's remarks on this contradiction in *Being and Nothingness*: "I cannot be an object for myself because I am what I am. Reduced to its own resources, the reflective attempt to achieve splitting ends in failure; I am always recaptured by myself." Expanding on Sartre's observation, Starobinski says: "In reflection the primitive unity of consciousness cracks."

Starobinski is, in many ways, his own ideal critic, focussing on a minute passage—an intimate moment, say, in *Oedipus Rex*—then turning to the wider context, offering a panoramic view informed by his own brand of European learnedness: an erudition that includes an easy familiarity with Greek and Roman classics, an intimate sense of modern philosophical thinking as well as a grasp of Saussurian linguistics, all of which were "part of [his] intellectual baggage as a student in Geneva." The Saussurian aspect is noticeable in his use of

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structuralism at various points, as in "The Interpreter's Progress," the concluding essay of this collection.

This last essay anticipates one of the seminal works of poststructuralism, *S/Z*, in which Roland Barthes transmogrified the traditional method of *explication de texte* into a theoretical test case. Here, Starobinski puts the critical torchlight on a single passage from Rousseau's *Confessions*, "The Dinner at Turin," reading it exhaustively in order to show "that there were singular homologies between the syntactic organization of Rousseau's sentences and the rhythm of the development of civilization as described in his philosophy of history." No structuralist *per se*, he nevertheless argues that "structure is a necessary but not sufficient condition for the production of a literary text." In a typically eye-catching metaphor, he says that even "the prettiest girl in the world also has a skeleton." But the surface as well as the underlying structure continues to fascinate him, and he does not hesitate in this particular essay to speculate on the author's intentions. Commenting on this anti-New Critical maneuver, he says in the introduction to this volume: "I saw no need to decide whether these intentions were conscious or unconscious."

This willingness to regard a text as a mask with something "behind" it flies in the face of the formalist obsession with inherence, the unity of form and meaning that finally comprises the literary object. Critics, such as Paul de Man (in *Blindness and Insight*), readily accused Starobinski of naive "psychologizing" for daring to look behind the screen of the text. Starobinski wisely dismisses such criticism: "The dominating vantage of the critic is merely the privilege he derives from being a spectator who arrives on the scene after the fact, in a new age of knowledge and in the name of greater enlightenment."

Exactly where Starobinski stands in the context of modern critical theory is not easily judged, however much he owes to Poulet, to Maurice Blanchot, and others. He examines the contradictory rhetoric of texts with a methodological rigor similar to that of Paul de Man, who was endlessly (in his later, deconstructive way) demonstrating the ways in which the rhetoric of a complex literary text argues against itself. But literary objects dissolved under de Man's gaze like ice under a sunlamp. Starobinski, by contrast, has a forgiving gaze. He seems willing to risk moral judgments, willing to let the surface of a poem or novel endure the critical focus and live.

In his sensible essay on Freud called "Psychoanalysis and Literary Understanding," he cites the famous distinction made in *The Interpretation of Dreams* between manifest and latent content, saying that "Meaning abounds: one must know how to gather it in." As a critic, he is aware of the dangers of psychologizing, and he doesn't want to have the line between mask and speaker too firmly drawn. "The latent content is evidence that needs to be made evident," he says. He is interested in what is present *in* the work, not *behind* it, though he is fascinated by the ways that masks are used to capture meaning, "to

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gather it in." His interest in the personal history of the author remains intense, but it is always "a transcended history, a history that we must not forget is directed toward the work." In this sense, then, he is not simply a throwback to pre-New Critical biographical criticism.

One never quite forgets, I should add, that Starobinski has been strongly influenced by Poulet and his circle. As in his sensitive essay on *Hamlet* and *Oedipus Rex*, included here, he believes firmly that a critic's job is to penetrate the "world" of the author—the deep structures of an author's mind, a structure that can be gleaned by examining image-patterns, syntax, and recurrent themes. Like other phenomenological critics, he is finally a passive critic, one who thinks the object of criticism is not to evaluate the work at hand, nor to offer political judgments about it. The critical work is largely a homologous text, one that draws the hermeneutic circle as a skater makes a figure eight on the ice. It is seen as largely reproductive—a view in the main very much against the grain of poststructuralist theory.

Starobinski concludes "The Interpreter's Progress" with a telling observation:

> Since circularity and return to the point of departure are to be taken for granted, there is no explanatory method or technique that, if skillfully applied, cannot claim to make some contribution, whether it be one of pure description, causal filiation, or homology. There is no method that does not tell us at least something about the object of interpretation, as long as the text is not misconstrued. Hence no method can be rejected on principle. The question, rather, is whether any particular method is adequate, specific, and complete enough for the task at hand, whether it encompasses the whole of the object or simply one of its components, one of its forms of existence or levels of meaning.

Starobinski tells us a lot about the texts that fall under his ferocious gaze, as well he should; perhaps more interestingly, his work adds to the growing body of critical theory a way of reading that is neither intrusive nor merely adulatory and appreciative. His homologous readings are like soundings: the critic plunges into the depths, and the echo that returns is reformed, reticulated, with amazing grace.

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C. B. COX

C. S. Lewis and Conversion

IN 1951 C. S. LEWIS WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR MY CONVERSION. I was not converted to Christianity, as he would have wished, but to a kind of moral awareness radically opposed to my previous convictions. At that time I was in my third year as an undergraduate reading English at Pembroke College, Cambridge. During the Christmas vacation I read for the first time C. S. Lewis' famous *Screwtape Letters*, partly at the instigation of my many Pembroke friends who were practicing Christians.

In these letters, a bestseller since first published in 1942, a senior devil called Screwtape advises his nephew, Wormwood, on how to tempt his human victim, a Christian convert, to indulge himself in mortal sin. In the 10th and 11th letters we discover that at his office the convert has made some desirable new acquaintances, rich, smart, superficially intellectual and brightly sceptical about everything in the world. The convert will now exist in two different kinds of society, on Sundays with his companions at church, and on weekdays with this new set of sceptics. Screwtape points out that many human beings live, for quite long periods, two parallel lives. While kneeling with the grocer on Sunday at church, the convert will feel superior because the grocer could not possibly understand the urbane and mocking world the convert inhabits on weekdays. Contrariwise, he can enjoy bawdy and blasphemy over coffee with his new friends because he knows he is aware of a "deeper," "spiritual" world they cannot understand. "You see the idea," Screwtape explains. "The worldly friends touch him on one side and the grocer on the other, and he is the complete, balanced, complex man who sees round them all." From this double role the convert will derive much self-satisfaction.

These letters threw a great hurtful light on my own vanity. At Pembroke I led two parallel lives, just like the convert. I played for the College soccer team, and in my second year had been awarded my colors for regular appearances in the first team. At the same time I had been successful in the English Tripos, and was proud of my first class honors. I felt superior to my soccer companions because I was a member of the College literary set (which included today's poet laureate Ted Hughes and the West Indian poet Edward Brathwaite) and because I had developed literary tastes many of the soccer players did not share. With my friends reading English I felt superior because on Wednesdays and Saturdays I turned out for the College soccer

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team, and spent time with extrovert scientists and engineers who would think my literary group boring and precious.

Retrospectively my vanity seems to me by no means exceptional, but that is the point. I was shocked to discover my own self-deception, and I concluded that this was common in all human beings. As I read the *Screwtape Letters*, I moved in one hour from the belief that human beings, like me, were naturally good, to the belief that all of us were innately selfish and self-deluded. At that time I translated this conversion into a belief in the doctrine of original sin. For a while I flirted with Christian worship, but I could never reconcile myself to the historical truth of the Resurrection or to Christian explanations for the problem of pain. But my awareness of my own vanity affected me permanently. Years later in educational debates in Britain I vigorously opposed the view, expressed by A. S. Neill in *Summerhill*, that children are innately wise.

A. N. Wilson's eloquent, absorbing biography of C. S. Lewis[1] reveals how the author of Screwtape himself led a double life. Behind his public identity as the popular children's writer of the Narnia stories and as the scholar made famous by his *The Allegory of Love* lay an extraordinarily fascinating and complex personality. After he returned in 1918 from the trenches in Flanders to resume study at Oxford, he combined the typical College life of intellectual debate and male friendships with a strange and very close relationship with Mrs. Janie Moore, a woman twenty-five years his senior. They lived together for over thirty years. As an undergraduate he slept in College, attended chapel, and spent his mornings at lectures and tutorials. In the afternoons he cycled every day without fail to dingy lodgings, for which he helped to pay the bills, where he shared companionship with Mrs. Moore and her fourteen-year-old daughter Maureen.

In his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy* (1955), Lewis gives no information about his relationship with Janie Moore nor does he tell us very much about his estrangement from his alcoholic father in Ireland, whom he kept as far as possible in ignorance about Mrs. Moore. In his biography A. N. Wilson interprets this strange double life with scrupulous attention to detail and with a forceful style. His theory is that the explanation for Lewis' behavior is sadomasochism. I found Wilson's arguments both intriguing and wrong. When she first met Lewis, Mrs. Moore was an attractive forty-five-year-old blonde, and Wilson deduces they were lovers from the beginning. I believe their relationship was not so easily explicable as Wilson suggests, and that he underestimates Lewis' moral scrupulosity and sexual fastidiousness. Wilson wants us to conclude that the spiritual leader whose books and radio broadcasts so influenced the moral life

[1] C. S. LEWIS: A Biography, by *A.N. Wilson*. W.W. Norton. $22.50.

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of thousands of acolytes was throughout his career deliberately keeping quiet about his own years of adultery. Like many biographers, Wilson accepts too easily simple Freudian explanations for behavior which is mysterious, contradictory and astonishing.

C. S. Lewis' mother died in Belfast in 1908, when he was nine years old. His father proved emotionally incapable of looking after his two sons (the elder brother Warnie was then thirteen), and there were outbursts of temper which Lewis never forgot. Most extraordinarily, two weeks after his mother's death Lewis was sent away from home for the first time to attend a tough boarding school in England. The headmaster of Wynyard House, near London, was bad-tempered and capricious, and also much addicted to corporal punishment. Lewis remained obsessed by Wynyard for the rest of his life, describing it in the most lurid terms as a concentration camp.

In 1917, during his first year at University College, Oxford, Lewis enlisted in the British army as a trainee officer. He was transferred to Keble College, where he shared a room with another cadet known to his friends as Paddy Moore, whose home was in Bristol. Lewis happily enjoyed entry into the family entourage which included Paddy's mother Janie and his sister Maureen. When in September Lewis was granted a month's leave he spent most of it with the family at Bristol. Undoubtedly after so many years without a mother Lewis found great solace in this easy entry to family intimacies. He made a pact with Paddy Moore that in the event of one or the other's death the survivor would look after the bereft parent of the one who had been killed. At the battle of Arras in 1918 Lewis was wounded, and returned to hospital in London, where Mrs. Moore immediately rushed to look after him. At the same time she heard that her own son had been killed.

And so did they become lovers? Mrs. Moore was permanently separated from her husband, and presumably might have found considerable satisfaction in a new sexual relationship. Wilson contends that while nothing will ever be proved on either side, the burden of proof is on those who believe that Mrs. Moore and Lewis were *not* lovers, probably from the summer of 1918 onwards. This seems to me disingenuous. Lewis' affection for Mrs. Moore was so extraordinary that perhaps the only proper response is to admit we will never know.

Wilson offers some evidence of sadomasochistic tendencies from Lewis' letters. During all his career he enjoyed bullying, and was notorious for his belligerence in tutorials. I heard him lecture only once, at a conference in the mid-1950s of university teachers of English. The lecture was disappointing, and I awaited the question period with keen anticipation. As soon as the first questioner started speaking, Lewis descended from the rostrum, and stood looming over him. Lewis demanded that he should explain himself more clearly,

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and the questioner soon lapsed into silence. There were no more questions.

Wilson contrasts this delight in bullying with Lewis' domestic enslavement to Mrs. Moore. He appears to have endured the domestic routines and chores demanded from him with a martyr's patience. Mrs. Moore always spoke of him as her adopted son, and there seem many good reasons for saying that is exactly what he was. She replaced his lost mother; he replaced her lost son. After Paddy's death in the trenches Mrs. Moore desperately needed a substitute; Lewis' desire for the lost mother makes it possible that he would have been shocked if she had tried to seduce him. Wilson says almost nothing about Mrs. Moore's possible emotional reactions to the killing of her son. Many women never recover from such shocks; Mrs. Moore found a second son in Lewis, and to presume they must have had sex together is a reaction more likely to be taken for granted in 1990 than in 1920.

I have similar reservations about Wilson's explanations for Lewis' conversion to Christianity in 1929. Wilson's chapter is entitled "Redemption by Parricide 1925–1929." He argues that Lewis was frightened that readers of *Surprised by Joy* would be able to say that his religion could be explained in terms of the Oedipus complex, and that is why he barely mentions his guilt about his rejection of his father for Mrs. Moore. He was only able to find peace for his heart when he could bury his earthly father and come to terms with a Heavenly Father of his own projection. In the summer of 1929 Lewis' conversion preceded his father's death by only a few weeks; for the rest of his life he served his God as Christian apologist with immense dedication and zeal.

Many of Lewis' closest friends at Oxford, such as Hugo Dyson, J. R. Tolkien and Nevill Coghill, were practicing Christians. Wilson underestimates how in small Oxbridge college communities of this period, with their daily ritual of services in chapel, great emotional pressure was applied on non-believers so that it was difficult for an outsider like Lewis not to feel guilt. He was forced to think daily about his moral and theological commitments. From his early days as an undergraduate reading philosophy, as Wilson explains very clearly, Lewis had come to the necessity of believing in an Absolute. For him, thought itself was a metaphysical act, a form of contemplation which connected the mind to the transcendent. Together with such beliefs he combined that understanding of the small areas of conscience so brilliantly displayed in the *Screwtape Letters*. It is a mistake to see his eventual conversion as only a psychological response to his estrangement from his father. He was always responsive to aesthetic pleasure and to the numinous, and surrounded by Oxford Christians it is not surprising that he came to associate these experiences with belief in God. As in my own case, his conversion came largely from his reading, from daily arguments with friends, and from insight into his own

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faults. I suspect that, like me, he enjoyed his double life, feeling superior to Mrs. Moore because of his fame as a scholar, and to the Oxford dons because of his secret participation in the ordinary domestic routines of his substitute mother. The success of the *Screwtape Letters* is based on self-knowledge.

Mrs. Moore bitterly resented Lewis' conversion, chiding him when he resumed the practice of Holy Communion for attending "blood feasts." Wilson suggests that at this time, when Lewis was thirty-three and Mrs. Moore fifty-eight, his conversion persuaded him to abandon their sexual relationship, and that is why she reacted so violently. This seems to me wild speculation. Mrs. Moore probably felt that Lewis' decision would separate him emotionally from her own ways of thinking, her own deliberate rejection of the Christian faith. Wilson is a prolific journalist, and his book reflects journalistic conventions common in many financially successful biographies. He needs drama and sensation and sexual imbroglios. He suggests that as some men pay prostitutes not for overtly sexual favors but for humiliation of the humdrum kind, so Lewis, caught in a strange web of masochism, found emotional fulfilment in scrubbing kitchen floors and scouring pans in the service of Mrs. Moore. For Wilson, Lewis' conversion is a response to such repressed psychological needs, to his hidden and powerful emotional life, rather than to his long quest for self-understanding, his long hours of conscious thought and self-analysis.

It is true that Lewis was not a great thinker, and that his writings as theologian and philosopher are flawed. His attempts to justify miracles or to explain the problems of pain are easy to refute. In 1948 at the Oxford Socratic Club he suffered a humiliating defeat at the hands of the philosopher Elizabeth Anscombe. As pugilistic in debate as he was, she found it easy to demolish his philosophical arguments for the existence of God, and as she was herself a Christian she could not be put down as a prejudiced infidel. Wilson thinks this defeat awakened deep-seated fears in Lewis, not least his fear of women, and that he reverted to childhood like a little boy degraded by a figure who, in his imagination, took on witch-like dimensions. At this time he resumed the writing of *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, the first of his famous *Chronicles of Narnia*. Wilson contends that this story "grew out of Lewis's experience of being stung into childhood by his defeat at the hands of Elizabeth Anscombe at the Socratic Club." This is the kind of remark which occurs continually in Wilson's biography and to which I take exception. Motivations are not so simple or so easily explained. The Narnia stories had been started long before, and it is probably true that this escape into childhood fantasy was partly a response to the late 1940s in England, a period of war-weariness and depression which took over a decade to eradicate.

But Wilson tells his story with verve and imagination. If there is a heaven, C. S. Lewis may look down on earth with distaste at these invasions of his privacy. In addition to Wilson's book, we have

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Shadowlands, a successful television play adapted later for the theatre which deals with his tragic marriage in the 1950s to Joy Gresham, who died of cancer. This play quite deliberately changes major details of his life for dramatic effect. For example, Joy's sons are presented as little boys when in fact they were in their late teens. C. S. Lewis in his heaven might be consoled because he alone knows the truths about which Wilson speculates. He also would know that through the Narnia books his reputation as a classic writer of children's literature seems assured.

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DICK ALLEN

"Signs of How We Must Seek"

A NUMBER OF YEARS AGO, after looking at a small charcoal sketch by Giacometti, I tried to draw something similar. It seemed an easy task: a few lines, balance, a face and thin legs. But dozens of crumpled drawings later, I'd relearned the lesson of deceptive simplicity.

I kept thinking of this experience while reading Louis Simpson's latest collection, *In the Room We Share*.[1] At first glance, the poems seem plain anecdotal jottings, easy to imitate. Yet when reread (or read aloud to friends—one often does this with a Simpson poem) the sheer *appropriateness* of the works becomes apparent. How did he *do* that? And again we recognize Simpson as an American original, continuing to succeed in his self-appointed task of portraying the middle-class American surburban life just "As others before you / were born to walk in procession / to the temple, singing."

Simpson's seemingly artless line is actually very controlled, the result of an ear acutely tuned to the stops, starts, pauses, and quick thrusts of American speech patterns. He sacrifices the density of a complex, musical, multi-allusive lyric line for an accessible-to-all, butter-smooth line accommodating random ideas and feelings and observations. His poems are whole experiences, their parts, their images, consumed by the total effect. It is almost an exact reverse to a Richard Wilbur lyric—I sometimes think several generations of American poets have abandoned formal lyric poetry to Wilbur consciously; acknowledging his singular mastery in our time, they are free to explore other types of poems.

Reading Simpson since his California conversion, we remember the poems more for what they reveal, for their situations, for people who inhabit them, than for "how" a given poem means. The characteristic Simpson poem tells a small gentle or ironic story with impossible to predict associations, turnings. When the story is completed, the reader pauses, convinced it went exactly right. When a short Simpson poem does not work, it either remains an interesting anecdote or has edged over from irony to an imposed sense of sorrow or a flip closure. But "The People Next Door" is one of the best. In it, we meet neighbors who "instead of going to church / on Sunday . . . go to sea." The narrator recalls his own experiences with being a family man: "Yes, I believe in the family . . . / next door. I rejoice / at their

[1] IN THE ROOM WE SHARE, by *Louis Simpson*. Paragon House. $18.95.

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incomings and outgoings." It gives him "a strange feeling / to think how far they've come / from some far world to this, / bending their necks to the yoke / of affection." Despite the ironic distance kept by the narrator, the poem ends with him thinking

> . . . that one day,
> with a few simple words
> and flowers to keep them company
> they'll return once more to the silence
> out there, beyond the stars.

Simpson, who for some time used rather self-conscious surreal elements to touch the lines of his plain style with mystery, has learned to render mystery matter-of-factly. Realism dominates *In the Room We Share*.

The confidence of Simpson's method is amply demonstrated by the wonderful narrative poem, "The Magic Carpet." It starts off seeming to be about movies: "Let the people of other nations / make the cars and build cathedrals— / we know how to look at moving pictures." The narrator goes to Paris "to see a movie and write subtitles / for twenty thousand dollars." In a series of vignettes, he meets the movie's producers, experiences Paris. A partner who "managed the Odes of Keats, a rock group" flies in from London. The characters eat snails; Bernie Wachsman, the narrator's probably gangster contact, tells him an anecdote from the Depression to explain "that's what we're put here for, / to enjoy ourselves." The movie turns out to be soft-core pornography, the movie deal breaks up and we last hear the narrator, escaped from the world of wealth, power and danger he'd briefly touched, *not* "at the bottom of the East River / with my feet in a concrete block." This poem has the final effect of all of Simpson's best: we recognize—for all of us have at one time or another briefly touched worlds parallel to ours—how shifting, how accidental, what a combination of mundanity and splendor each of our lives is.

And that, really, is why we read Louis Simpson. We identify with the people who inhabit his poems. He has not chosen to write of "poverty and injustice" abstractly, but follows the advice of the poor man Jabez: "Talk about me, / about a bundle of rags / covered with a sheet of iron, / and a pair of naked footsoles." Or, as he says in "Riverside Drive":

> It seems that we are here to say
> names like "Spry" and "Riverside Drive" . . .
> to carry the names of places
> and things with us, into the night
>
> glimmering with stars and constellations.

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We are here to sympathize with Mike, of "Herons and Water Lilies," who is a Renaissance scholar teaching at an unappreciative Midwestern state university ("Think what that man / must have to reconcile") and to recognize the reality of a peace march not being "what it was supposed to be" when some of the candles leave, "wandering off / down Cedar and Livingston and Buena Vista"; to have desultory conversations in service station waiting rooms, and to know that even into the life of mundane Harry, with "his barbecue pit and bug zapper," there are moments when "geese fly up from the ocean" beautifully.

An autobiographical prose narrative, "Villa Selene," concludes this volume. It is beautifully written and thoroughly interesting. Yet its crafted style may leave skeptics still wondering if Simpson, in his poetry, has crossed a border and is actually, even given his great ear for the caesura effect, writing prose arranged into lines. For instance:

> the things we remember about people
> are not the things they pride themselves on,
> but some small incident
> or something they said

sounds like it could be a stanza from one of Simpson's poems, but is actually prose from "Villa Selene" that I've broken into lines. Still, what does it matter? Simpson, like one of his models, Chekhov, has shown "the poetry in common things." This rich, full collection, written at the height of Simpson's powers, confirms that he is a major modern poet.

In the last few years, narrative poetry has become one of contemporary poetry's strongest forces. For good reason, I think. Mundanity is an increasing aspect of contemporary lives and the narrative allows poets to deal more honestly and realistically with it than does the lyric, rendering it without the criticism of mundanity occurring automatically when poets try to present it in a poem of shining artifice. Anyway, Mark Jarman's new collection is one of the best examples of the new narrative's powers and techniques. In the seventeen poems that make up *The Black Riviera*,[2] Jarman, like Simpson, tells us stories out of ordinary lives. His poetic line, however, is longer and more textured than Simpson's and the stories push more consciously toward transcendent meanings and realizations.

The collection is much concerned with the emotional effects storytelling has upon our imagination. We explore answers to "What were they saying, the storytellers, / The newsbringers, the parablists, / The fabulists, the gathered tribe . . . ?" So it is that in "The Gift" we hear a woman reminisce about "When I was five my father kidnapped me,"

[2] THE BLACK RIVIERA, by *Mark Jarman*. Wesleyan University Press. $20.00; $9.95.

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and in "Liechtenstein" we hear a complicated story of children and their mother being told a story in a restaurant, a story about witches and about a language "That, now she knows, can break glass in a face." In the title poem, the black Riviera arrives, a hand reaches out selling dope, and the poem turns into a realization of worlds beyond dreams:

> In fact, some of us woke up that way.
> It has to do with how desire takes shape.
> Tapered, encapsulated, engineered
> To navigate an illusion of deep water,
> Its beauty has the dark roots
> Of a girl skipping down a high-school corridor
> Selling Seconal from a bag,
> Or a black car gliding close to the roadtop,
> So insular, so quiet, it enters the earth.

In "Sea-Fig" we explore a new country where "if you come by night, drop anchor / Beyond the seal rock, wait there until morning. / There is a lighthouse, as I've said before, / A haunted one. Don't trust the light it throws." We hear the tragic story of "D" in "Good Friday," of "The Mystic" who "After World War II, . . . said he walked past homes wondering how / The people in them woke and went to bed and in between went on with life."

My two favorite poems are "Testimony and Postscript" and "Miss Urquhart's Tiara." In the former, Jarman catches, just right, how we *almost* enter lives of others permanently. The narrator drives away from a young woman, "Out of her life, her half of a memory / He would never know the worth of, if it had one." In the latter poem, the narrator walks with his daughter, remembers a short story he once read, retells the short story, then reinterprets the story, and finally enters it and becomes one of its characters.

Each superb narrative seduces us into a story and then, when we are caught, leads us through levels of perception until we realize we are always part of what we hear, that "We lie in bed at night, thinking about / The future, always the future, always forgetting / That it will be the past, hard and hollow, / Veiled and humming, soon enough."

Brooks Haxton, too, is primarily a narrative poet. His *Dead Reckoning*[3] is a 233-page novel written in blank verse so deftly handled that soon the reader forgets the poetic line and becomes completely caught up by the story. The tale has mythological underpinning: a hero steals his father's dead body and buries it in a mystical place in order to prevent his evil stepmother from claiming the father's inheritance. The hero is joined by a young woman, and with her enters a swamp in search of treasure. They find the treasure and sell

[3] DEAD RECKONING, by *Brooks Haxton*. Story Line Press. $11.95p.

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it, along with a magical object found when the hero buried his father's body. After a year, the hero's wounds have healed, probably as a consequence of his deeds, and he and the woman find peace in the countryside. The thwarted stepmother goes mad.

As Haxton transforms the tale, it has a Southern setting, the hero is a Vietnam vet, the father's body is stolen from a modern hospital, the woman is a battered wife and her pursuing husband a drug dealer. The swamp holds the husband's marijuana crop. The stepmother goes mad while thinking that a black prowler is going to rob her. The treasure from the burial ground is an ancient American Indian axe, and the countryside is a rural farm with a mule.

Does it work? In the main, yes. One particular experience is especially harrowing. Hero Eddy and his girlfriend Amy are in the swamp:

> Big snakes roiled
> On themselves in sluggish brown-black rivulets.
> Only the few stopped at their very feet
> Seemed to acknowledge them now, tasting them
> On the air with flickering tongues, taking in
> The warmth of mammal bodies nearby
> Into the sensitive pits behind the eyes.
> Upheld heads dead still darted thin pink prongs,
> And these, the closest, when they moved moved toward
> Amy and Eddy, slow, but never away.

Dialogue is done smoothly, naturally. And because the novel is written in verse rather than straight prose, abrupt transitions between scenes and episodes are easily accepted. Still, there are few of the taut passages of transcending thought and feeling, intense lines, or brilliant observations about humanity that we look for in the finest book-length narrative. And some of the plot paraphernalia is pretty ridiculous, with contrived situations and coincidences.

The recent narratives and other poems of Sydney Lea, in his fourth collection, are exceptional. Lea's *Prayer for the Little City*[1] is a work of reverence and compassion. Each carefully-wrought poem—most set in upper New England—shows how quiet wonder and extreme technical skill can be yoked to give us poems of surpassing excellence.

In the title poem, we begin with a description of a little city of ice-fishermen's shacks, and then the scene is transformed:

> The dullness is pure. No signs, no wonders, no mystery . . .
> except it be the care with which all night men linger,

[1] PRAYER FOR THE LITTLE CITY, by *Sydney Lea*. Charles Scribner's Sons. $17.95.

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as if in prayer for a novel fish, or a novel way
by which to address some thing they're feeling. Surely this is
part of what holds . . . . . .

Surely, surely
a sense that early, before the dawn (or sooner or later)
our flags will all at once, together, tremble and shimmy.

Epiphany —o bright palaver!

In other poems, Lea walks out to meditate, tells in "For the Solitary" of a dying man who longed to live in Alaska, in "D-Day Ode for Dean" tells the story of a man "prepared in the night to be killed / but had wakened to wondrous calm: / colors, sheep, cattle" and of an organist in "For Faith" who seems an ordinary person but, when she plays: "If I'm wrong, still something rich and grand must move her / and make that light a fool could see above her."

The collection is further impressive for its *tour de force* poems, such as the litany of a winter walk, "Manifest" ("In warmth and shelter and fire, / to which of course you will return, / for which you are whetting desire; // In desire, whose quenching is life . . ."), "Pianissimo," the extraordinarily rhymed and metered "Sun, Rising" and "Pietà" and the terrific use of language and image in "Late Season." Lea constantly receives "the signs of how we must seek to save forever / what we receive of what goes by." Into the major religious sequence, "Six Sundays Toward a Seventh," Biblical phrases are woven. We attend church services, hear voices of parishioners, have an intertwining of the sacred and the profane. Hymns ring through the sequence, pain, visits by guests, memories, ordinary concerns, thoughts of acid rain, the poor, and love, and "We have left undone the things we ought to have done, / And the other way round. . . . " Yet, during "Still dark when we file like children out on the turf" and "As a fish-eye sun slides open over the mountain, / Our children strain to break from us and play." Finally, "We end with *This our hymn of grateful praise.*"

Short narratives, almost snippets, are primary in Jane Reavill Ransom's first collection, *Without Asking*,[5] winner of the 1989 Nicholas Roerich Poetry Prize. The language is vivid throughout, the imagery impressive ("Like a businessman / after work, the night drops / its white shirt / and glides, naked, into my bed," and "I worship the strangeness of others: / their mysteries glint in this light—bronze bells"). There are good pictures, such as "The Neighbors Slept" and when, in "Sequence," "I take responsible steps, carrying myself / like a hot supper dish."

[5] WITHOUT ASKING, by *Jane Reavill Ransom*. Story Line Press. $9.95p.

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Yet most of the poems here, I'm afraid, belong to the school of *National Enquirer* poetry, whose headmistress is Sharon Olds: personal "I"-centered poems relating one shocking incident or event from the author's life after another, when "The floor thickens with cockroaches and mold," when there is incest and menstrual blood, when there is hate and embarrassment. A section deals with Ransom's mother's death from cancer, leading us through the devastating experience, "the filaments in her lung sputtering." A small poem, given in its entirety, shows Ransom's typical approach:

He Looks Like My Father

And so I try to crawl backward,
squeezing small enough to fall through his eye—
his sea, flecked with gold bubbles and green sequins—
and go deeper, into the liquids below,
as if he were woman, and had a womb.
I search his lips
for blood-reds of childhood—
my skinned knees, my first menstruation—
and his tongue buds for the starfish
sidling beneath me,
as I dog-paddled the Mediterranean.

The poem shows care of construction, Ransom's acute sense of observation. Yet shock, horror, explicit sexuality, grotesquenesses and mere presentations of situations do not alone make poetry. However, Jane Reavill Ransom will get better. Watch her.

Paul Kane's poems, in his first book, *The Farther Shore*,[6] are anything but snapshots. In this short one, we can immediately note the contrast with Ransom, the resonance:

Plastic Explosive in Toorak Road

The shop assistant steps up into the window bay
demurely, pauses, and begins to undress
the mannikin. Smiling at her thoughts, self-
conscious in exposure, she notices she
is noticed. The man in the car is also young,
but his smile is forced, his look abstract.
Nakedness is force. She begins dismembering:
first an arm, then another, lies on the ground.
With a tenderness that perplexes her, she holds
a head in her lap. She could almost cry.

[6] THE FARTHER SHORE, by *Paul Kane*. George Braziller. $14.95; $8.95.

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There are other excellent poems in this book, including its title poem, the evocation of "Canada" ("Really—there was nothing Cartier could do but see it / As something savage, something that reduced himself / And enlarged the stars and the portion of him // That beating suddenly with life . . ."), and "Devices," the little song of "Winter is Coming," the dramatic monologue spoken by Emerson in "Mr. Emerson Assisted On His Walk," the rhymed and pretty quatrains of "The Glass Forest" and a lovely "Aubade." Kane is an accomplished poet, his tone mainly muted, his attention wide, his knowledge fitted easily into his lyrics and small narratives. It is a studied poetry for the most part, this first quatrain from "By the Ruins of Carthage at Sunset" typical:

> The flat sky, cerise, moves west beyond the lighted sea:
> splendid, magnanimous with its cavalcade of clouds,
> indifferent to demise, untouched by all the importunities of
> promise, it gathers winds to itself along the shore.

Fate is accepted, ". . . the way it // redefines the terms of life as pure / survival, how suddenly all is / altered by some freak concurrence." By far and away, the finest poem in the book is "Stellar Junk." It's the end of the world. Things fall from the sky, "the first to return were the satellites," later "a violin floated down," and "saints, martyrs came, shrouded, / Lazarus and the prophets, mystics, Church fathers." Christ returns and is crucified again. And five times through this magnificent poem, ending each stanza, is a variation on "O Lord, we cried, give us another vision." We are far from Simpson's language but we can certainly still celebrate this return of high style.

In Charlie Smith's *Indistinguishable from the Darkness*[7] the attention is relentlessly inward. The poems are meditations, smoothly written and toned, but ultimately dull. Smith is fond of phrases like "I am in one of those strange moods," "I know this," "Maybe you know" and "wondering, as I do" and "I was agitated" and "I am tired" and "I thought, the way one can." In Smith's own words, from "As in Japan This Morning," "After a while / it is simply too much."

The book contains one of contemporary poetry's worst lines, a real howler from "On Evening Tide": "I am one who knows the scummy lake margins." Nearly as awful, from "Transformation to White," is when the narrator watches a peep show: "Nonetheless, // sated with the spill of jism, I will be / satisfied, momentarily relieved / again."

The poems feature very long maudlin sentences with a lot of "which" clauses, lots of shades of light and dark, mournful moods, cliches and stock phrases, the words "perhaps" and "maybe" constantly occurring. Here's what Smith is trying:

[7] INDISTINGUISHABLE FROM THE DARKNESS, by *Charlie Smith*. W.W. Norton. $17.95.

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Only, I guess,
I seek a certain rhythm, the dumb bob
of a pigeon's head, the old friend
calling from Kansas, the muck of love—
its resignation and exuberance—the red flowers
returned to the trees
as if winter were nothing to them, nothing at all.

That might be the problem, that seductive rhythm, that exploration of *tone* that has so captivated too many American poets, the soft pulsing rhythms, harmonies, verbal effects so seductive that they often cause the poet to forget what he or she might explore in the reality beyond the Self. In a way, working with the kind of rhythms Smith does is not dissimilar to the mediocre formal poet working to master form so hard he forgets that style cannot make up for lack of content. And so, too often, the result of the method ends up sounding like this passage from Smith's "The Meaning of Birds":

. . . . it is not news that we live in a world
where beauty is unexplainable
and suddenly ruined
and has its own routines. We are often far
from home in a dark town, and our griefs
are difficult to translate into a language
understood by others. We sense the downswing of time
and learn, having come of age, that the reluctant
concessions made in youth
are not sufficient to heat the cold drawn breath
of age. . . .

Slack, wordy stuff.

Thomas Lux's fifth collection, *The Drowned River*,[8] is an absorbing, entertaining work, each poem immediately engaging the reader's interest. Although, like Jane Ransom, he often only *presents* observations rather than drawing out meaning from them, his poems are not centered on purely personal matters. Lux has developed a flexible, colloquial style well suited for such various subjects as "Traveling Exhibit of Torture Instruments," "Walt Whitman's Brain Dropped on Laboratory Floor" and "Motel Seedy." He is relentless in skewing pretension, earnest in seeking meaning, eminently quotable. As he says in "Mr. Pope": "It was not meanness or misanthropy / that drove him to ravage dunces / but more so sorrow / and some rage. . . ."

Like Simpson, he is particularly fine in understanding middle-class America. He loves "America's backyards":

[8] THE DROWNED RIVER, by *Thomas Lux*. Houghton Mifflin. $16.95; $8.95.

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. . . a washed out willow,
starveling hedge, tool shed,
a dozen times dented,
and a greasy streak
against the garage where a barbecue
went berserk. A Chevy engine block
never hauled away
or the classic Olds on chocks . . .

He has exact descriptions of American cellars, dogs, driving from Boston to New York, "The Perfect God" and an "Old Man Shoveling Snow." The poems range widely through a variety of emotions and techniques. Here's "Uncle Joe," prefaced by Stalin's words, "One death is a tragedy, a million just statistics":

Slave labor—*the bones the cold earth holds*—slave labor.
Uncle Joe never loved nobody, nobody ever loved Uncle Joe.
Temporarily do the work of a horse: if you want his favor.
Slave labor—*the bones the cold earth holds*—slave labor.
The frozen camps filled with those who saw him as a savior!
Gratitude's for dogs, he said: don't feel it or let it show.
Slave labor—*the bones the cold earth holds*—slave labor.
Uncle Joe never loved nobody, nobody ever loved Uncle Joe.

and this is from "Floating Baby Pictures":

. . . rosy fellows
with wings; joyous, busy,
observational little blimps, their delicate wings
not flapping (never painted as a blur
despite their weight), but there they fly, floating
babies! For centuries
they show up—sometimes carrying a lyre,
a dove or two, of course a bow,
but mostly just ecstatic, naked, fat.
Bless them, their cargo,
their unexampled flight patterns.

The Drowned River is about "The daily fare, every day ugly in some way, / every day beautiful and gone." Too often blurb writers and reviewers say this poet or that has come into his own. But for Thomas Lux, it's true.

The appearance of Miller Williams' *Living on the Surface: New and Selected Poems*[9] is another cause for celebration. Williams has always been one of our best poets, but his productivity (the poems are

[9] LIVING ON THE SURFACE, by *Miller Williams*. Louisiana State University Press. $24.95; $14.95.

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selected from eight books), his unevenness (almost all his books have contained very weak poems), his constant variety of technique, subject and approach, some of his early quirkiness, his jazzy poem titles (some having the effect of self-deprecating the poems that follow them), and an always present tendency to hector have kept reviewers from focusing on his real strengths. A "Selected Poems" gives us a chance to do this and what we can now see is the steady growth of Williams into a wonderful storyteller, a master of form, a poet who has brought back from his wide-ranging sensibilities and interests a necessary understanding of our times. And he knows how to handle closure better than any other poet alive.

There are scores of memorable poems here, so many I won't even attempt a list. Williams can range from the lyricism of "A Poem for Emily," from which these lines come:

> Child whatever is
> is always or never was. Long ago,
>
> a day I watched awhile beside your bed,
> I wrote this down, a thing that might be kept
> awhile, to tell you what I would have said
> when you were who knows what and I was dead
> which is I stood and loved you while you slept.

to "Thinking Friday Night with a Gothic Storm Going About Final Causes and Logos and Mitzi Mayfair":

> This is philosophy I think
> and science and a waste of ink.
>
> And still I know the shape I touch
> that seems something is nothing much,
>
> is only a moving, and we are dreams
> we have about us. The earth that seems
>
> rocks and water is only force
> moving through a shape. . . .

to the splendid little poem, "Being Here":

> The ring of a doorbell
> at three in the morning
> even before you know who's standing out there
> changes not only the face that flies into your head
> but shoes also and the backs of chairs and the repetitions
> of wallpaper.

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You may say a quick prayer
but anyway you will take it as you have to.

to the dramatic monologue of "The Promotion":

And then he married
a scarce-hipped woman. You know the kind of girl
that cooks turnips and peas in the same pot,
the kind that gets entailed in her man's affairs.
The kind of woman yours is clearly not.
You can trust a high-breasted woman.
Small women getting undressed will lay their rings
in patterns and turn their stockings right side out,
but this has no effect on the order of things.

Throughout his poetry, Williams knows "One of the hardest things we have to do / is face the awful fact of the ordinary" and yet, like most of the other poets reviewed in this Chronicle, he relentlessly does this. But he also accepts, as does his character Ruby, that some feel "there is love, constancy, and kindness." Although "What we watch / or wallow in is all that we can share" Williams also has another character say, "we have to think continually of heroes / or be dragged to madness of some sort / in which we are ones, as we have dreamed, and zeroes, / however serious and of good report." On this "one impossible road," "we'll live with the holidays we have / and the grace of God as if it were."

In no way a mystic ("There is no constancy but a falling away / with only love as a temporary stay / and not much assurance of that"), Miller Williams also knows "how failing together we shall finally pass" and "What matters most in survival is learning the names / of things and the names of visions. . . ." and to "Look how sunlight collects on the bridge." By turns colloquial, funny, clever, cute, lyrical, angry, sorrowing, desperate to record the truth of our lives here and now, bitter, despairing, wise, Williams has won through. This book locks solid his now thoroughly proven stature. It's high time!

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TOM WILHELMUS

Reading Africa

> For the black race knows, and is content to know, itself. It is the European world that has sought, with the utmost zeal, to redefine itself through these encounters, even when the European has appeared to be endeavoring to grant meaning to and experience of the African world.
>
> —From Wole Soyinka's Nobel Prize Address

CHINUA ACHEBE, NEXT TO SOYINKA Nigeria's best-known novelist, once called Joseph Conrad "a thoroughgoing racist" because *Heart of Darkness* criticizes European colonialism but pays almost no attention to Africans themselves. Such an omission in a classic of the Western literary canon, he says, calls "the very humanity of black people . . . into question." Clearly this is an oversimplification. Yet Western literature does have a long history of using Africa as a symbol rather than as a fact. Think of Don Quixote in Algiers and of Robinson Crusoe with the lion on the West African coast. Think of Bellow's *Henderson*. "It is not the fully conscious mind which chooses [to travel in] Africa," says Graham Greene in *Journey Without Maps*. And Africans know what kind of symbols the Western subconscious is apt to produce: "Africa," says Achebe, "is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate."

Three recent books, one by Soyinka and two others by white American women, illustrate that while matters may have improved, Westerners still have problems seeing Africa clearly. Therefore, we can relish the brilliance of an African—especially one with the genius of Soyinka—who allows us to see clearly and without the annoying cultural baggage Westerners most often bring with them when they write about their African experiences.

Sometimes that baggage can exist despite even the best intentions. For example, a distressing glibness hovers over Carol Spindel's *In the Shadow of the Sacred Grove*,[1] the story of her year-long stay in a West African village in Ivory Coast, caused I think by too much good will which rushes past subtleties and brushes aside and blurs distinctions.

[1] IN THE SHADOW OF THE SACRED GROVE, by *Carol Spindel*. Vintage Books. $8.95p.

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Like the young Russian in motley Conrad's Marlow found roaming around near the heart of the Congo, her principal fault seems not that she hasn't experienced Africa but that she hasn't meditated on it.

Friendly, enthusiastic, and willing to meet hardships head on, Spindel went to West Africa to stay with the young man she would eventually marry who was doing fieldwork in anthropology at the time. So perhaps it is his jargon she borrows on and off throughout the book whenever she wishes to sound an important note. "In Berkeley," she says, "the people I saw around me were searching for something. Lacking an inherited cultural tradition, they were seeking to formulate one of their own. . . . In Africa, communities who honor beliefs that are generations old still exist in a cohesive and viable form." The problem with such language lies in what Soyinka has called "a second epoch of colonisation [sic]" in which "black Africans have been blandly invited to submit [them]selves to . . . a universal-humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from the apprehension of *their* world and *their* history, *their* social neuroses and *their* value systems" (preface to *Myth, Literature and the African World*).

It is not just jargon, however, that hampers Spindel's awareness but rather another mannerism of expression that grows out of her conviction that she is adept at intercultural relations because her "father was born in Brooklyn to a family of Sephardic Jews and [her] mother in Arkansas to Southern Baptists." This second language contributes a chatty, self-indulgent homeyness to her text that limits its perceptions at every turn. Faced, for instance, with preparing a feast for the villagers and at a loss about local customs and expectations, she explains how she had always prided herself "on being a trooper" and knows from being "a girl in the South" how women are supposed to be adept at social conventions. Of course, she says, "Every cook knows that worry before a dinner party. . . . Will the guests like it?" Similarly, when her fiancé's assistant betrays him, the answer to his mortification is a good "squeeze." When she reads books, it is in order to take a "brief vacation." When she learns a language, she does it quickly simply to get by. Nor is she above repeating a racist remark apparently hoping it is excusable if it is directed at whites: "The way Sibatia's little boy still squalled in terror at the sight of us, I thought he must have been told the night before, 'If you don't stop crying and eat your rice, I'm going to feed you to the whites.'"

Lacking a plot (especially after she dispenses with the book's only compelling character, the disreputable assistant, Yardjuma), Spindel seeks to provide interest by describing a guild of women potters through whom she apparently hopes to demonstrate her conviction that art and ritual are one and that women have a special role in the African community from which Americans may learn. Nonetheless, the most she can muster in the way of a sacral experience is an

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acknowledgment that, "Like many people I knew, I claimed to believe in Something. I just didn't want that something defined too clearly."

What is most disappointing about *In the Shadow of the Sacred Grove* is the sense of opportunity missed—of Spindel's not really learning much about village life, its social and cultural history, its complex interplay of languages and rituals, and the manner in which it is affected by modern, post-colonial conditions.

A different set of difficulties are revealed in Caroline Alexander's *One Dry Season: In the Footsteps of Mary Kingsley*,[2] a much more eloquent book but one that has even less to do with modern Africa. Alexander went to Africa, she says, to explore the route taken by the well-known nineteenth-century adventurer as it exists today along the banks of the Ogooue River in the independent nation of Gabon. The work turns out to be less an account of her own travels, however, than a surprisingly bookish commentary on the writings of Kingsley and a whole complement of other explorers, traders, and missionaries—including Paul B. du Chaille, Richard F. Burton, Albert Schweitzer, "Trader" Horn, and Robert Hamill Nassau—from a century ago. "Transfixed" though Alexander was by Kingsley's style which struck her as, "Breezy, ironic, bantering, [containing] passages of brilliant hilarity mixed with informative discussion and descriptive beauty," her own account has few of these qualities, and she reserves her best writing for passages of literary analysis. Even the following splendid passage, which at first seems to be pure description, is deeply imbued with Alexander's literary preoccupations:

> I stepped into the cavernous cathedral nave, which, stripped bare as it was of all pews and of every scrap of decoration, resembled a medieval dining hall more than it did a church. Dangling eerily on its broken chain above the choir loft was what appeared to be, but surely could not have been, a censer, spotlit by the weak light that entered through the large porthole window immediately behind it. All along the high side walls, the jungle had come peering in each window, groping with its sinuous tendrils into this private darkness, and leaf by leaf consigning it to a forgotten secrecy, like that enshrouding Sleeping Beauty's palace.

The cathedral Alexander describes is an artifact left over from another era. It has everything to do with the failed dream of African colonialism and practically nothing to do with contemporary Gabon.

Blessed as she is with splendid scholarly and critical skills, Alexander brings none of this insight to her own work. Underlying *One Dry Season* is a desire to return, in imagination, to "a sense of the

[2] ONE DRY SEASON: In the Footsteps of Mary Kingsley, by *Caroline Alexander*. Alfred A. Knopf. $18.95.

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freshness of life in [an] as yet unplundered Africa, the wonderment of its beauty and acute consciousness of [the] experience," which earlier travelers shared. Her pleasure in the past effectively blinds her to the present (remarkably, since her visit coincided with a Gabonese social and political crisis precipitated by a drop in world oil prices). Her nostalgia for "the glamour of African exploration" must have made modern Gabon, the Africans' Gabon, seem seedy by comparison.

Limited as they are, it would probably be unfair to say that Spindel's and Alexander's treatments of their experiences in Africa are dishonest or that they lack merit. It is only when we observe the particularity and complexity of a writer like Soyinka, who is a native African and a man of enormous talent and conviction, that their works seem to pale.

Ìsarà: A Voyage Around "Essay,"[3] Soyinka's most recent work, is a sequel to the celebrated reminiscence of his childhood, *Aké: The Years of Childhood* which appeared in 1982. It is also a tribute to his father, Soditan Akinyode—whose initials and profession as a schoolteacher gave him the nickname "Essay." This is the same father who figured prominently in the earlier memoir and who had died when Soyinka was away in political exile. The discovery of a collection of Essay's papers in a metal box, two years after *Aké* was written, inspired Soyinka with the desire to recreate the lives of a whole class of Nigerians who had been educated in British-style schools and who expected to become the professional leaders of the emerging nation. In a brilliant play on words, Soyinka makes Essay the center of a group of "Ex-Ilés," who had been sent, as children, away from their native village of Isara and taught in a teachers' training seminary, Ilesa, and who forever after would suffer the conflict of existing between cultures. In this way the story dramatizes not only Essay, a thoughtful, humane, erudite man, but also the hopes, dreams, fears, conflicts, self-doubts, failures, and successes of the circle of friends who annually, in the years leading up to World War II, return to Isara to reminisce, plan, and compare notes.

Each of the book's six chapters reveals a fluid mixture of reflections and interior monologue centering upon Essay or one of his fellow Ex-Ilés. The fluidity assures that each character will be seen both from inside and from out and makes each personality distinct but also part of a recognizable pattern. Each has his own particular style (Essay thinks pedagogically, his friend Sipe, entrepreneurially, and so forth); all are engaged in reconciling their elitist educations with the practical circumstances of living in a country which is still under British control but whose popular life is dominated by traditional practices and beliefs.

Powerful ironies emerge from this situation. Sipe sees business at every turn, yet he is stuck in the unrewarding occupation of tax

[3] ÌSARÀ: A Voyage around "Essay," by *Wole Soyinka*. Random House. $18.95.

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inspector and worries whether he should condescend to pay a medium to predict his business success. Osibe, the pharmacist, cannot be successful in a country where tribal medicine-making competes with modern drugs though, as Essay observes, "With European treatment, you eat all the medicine by yourself" while traditional rituals at least supply a community-wide contact. Much of the last third of the book is taken up with the manner in which Saaki, the trade unionist, winds up as the clan's candidate for king—a risky situation involving all kinds of byplay including pagan ritual, public drama (there is even an aside on mail-order dramatic training provided by a charlatan Trinidadian who advertises in the London-based *West African Review*), the local Anglican bishop, ex-slaves from Brazil, accusations of sodomy, Roger Casement, white horses, and the death of kings. It is characteristic of the richness of Soyinka's view of life and of his general good humor that much of this activity goes on while that other grand impertinence, World War II, is occupying the official consciousness of the country.

"I have long been preoccupied," Soyinka has written, "with the process of apprehending my own world in its full complexity, also through its contemporary progression and distortion" (preface to *Myth . . .*), a task he has pursued in fourteen plays, two novels, a collection of essays, a translation of a classic Yoruba novel, a collection of notes from prison, and now two memoirs. That he writes primarily in English demonstrates his refusal to ignore the "full complexity" of a world which includes the colonial past as well as his Yoruba heritage and the rich particulars of current everyday life. For similar reasons, he has not rejected sophisticated literary technique nor the value of private vision even while he is longing for political and social recognition and justice. Much of his creative life has been devoted to perfecting a unified vision of his world blending traditional Yoruba myths and Western thought in a rich mixture of satire, pageantry, realism, mummery, and popular culture. Soyinka studied drama with G. Wilson Knight at the University of Leeds in the 1950s, and his particular style and approach owes as much to Greek tragedy, Elizabethan drama, and Brecht as it does to native, African thought. In politics also he has rejected simplistic ideologies and "Negritudinisation," understanding that African culture is a rich complex of interacting groups and individuals. This vision may help to explain how he could accept the Nobel Prize in 1986 while using his Nobel Prize Address as a forum for calling for the release of Nelson Mandela and for criticizing both European and Arab colonialism in Africa.

In his mixture of styles and technical virtuosity, his rejection of racism and his awareness of racial injustice, his longing for total vision, his respect for myth, and his grappling with realities of the immediate past and present, Soyinka reminds me of his fellow Nobel laureate William Faulkner. No less than *Go Down, Moses*, *Ìsarà* is an

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attempt to come to terms with a legacy, symbolized by the contents of a tin box, the product of a divided consciousness in a divided land. Like all great artists, in other words, Soyinka bases all that he says firmly on clear-headed and particular observations of people, places, and ideas viewed in their full contradictory complexity. One of the most poignant but also amusing episodes in *Ìsarà* involves the attempt by Miriam, Essay's mother, to bury her brother whose religion—among the great variety available to him in the village, including Christian and Muslim as well as a variety of traditional cults—is unknown to her when he dies. Clearly it is the mixture of ideas and acts, motives and meanings, anxieties and outcomes, that gives the episode its strength and wins for us all as readers some hope of truly knowing something about Africa as it is and not as we imagined it to be. Within this prescription there is even the hope that races may meet and know each other as equals. For years Essay had corresponded with an American, also a teacher, named Wade Cudeback, from a town—Ashtabula, Ohio—certainly as exotically named as any place in Africa. Essay had been thinking about Cudeback as the first chapter opened, and as the last chapter closes, at a celebration for the Ex-Ilé's candidate for the kingship, Cudeback unaccountably turns up, and the two men, one white and one black, observe this moment of the Ex-Ilé's triumph together. Soyinka opens and closes the narrative with the same word, the same obscure hope, "Ashtabula"!

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SUZANNE RHODENBAUGH's* chapbook, *A Gold Rain at Lonely-farm*, was published early this year by Heatherstone Press. She has completed a full-length collection, *Lick of Sense*. . . . JOHN LOUGHERY,* a teacher, biographer, and journalist, is a contributing editor for *New Art Examiner* and a book reviewer for *Woman's Art Journal*. . . . BERT CARDULLO was awarded the degree Doctor of Fine Arts at Yale's 1990 commencement. . . . JAY PARINI's third novel, *The Last Station*, was recently published by Henry Holt. . . . C. B. COX was awarded the Commander of the British Empire in this year's British New Year's Honours list for his work as chair of the government committee charged with preparing a national curriculum in English. He is Pro-Vice-Chancellor at Manchester University, and Professor of English Literature. . . . DICK ALLEN's long essay on contemporary American poetry, "The Emperor's New Clothes," will appear in a forthcoming Story Line Press anthology. Allen holds the Charles A. Dana Chair of Literature at the University of Bridgeport. . . . TOM WILHELMUS co-directs the RopeWalk Writers' Retreat with the poet Matthew Graham. The Retreat was the recent recipient of a grant from the Witter Bynner Foundation for Poetry.

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IN THIS ISSUE:

In Greek mythology the maiden Europa was carried off by a lascivious god in the form of a bull, which at least suggests some powerful moving force; the founders of the American republic had the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to inspire them, or at least to shape their rhetoric; the Soviet Union, in its day, had Marxism. Europe has plenty of ideas, but it is without a master idea.

—George Watson,
"A Common European Home," p. 358.

It was, then, more than lthe afflatus of the sixties that impelled Barthes to kill the Author, and rebel against "a language political in its origin" . . . "born at the moment when the upper classes wished . . . to convert the particularity of their writing into a universal language." Though there were contemporary reasons to proclaim liberation from the heavy rod of the Father-God, Barthes's sense of urgency, of need, of triumph was rooted deep in the historic soil of France.

—Clara Claiborne Park,
"Author! Author! Reconstructing Roland Barthes," p. 377.

The evening had grown dark enough for headlights as he turned into Truax's neighborhood. From the end of the street he could make out the green Volvo in the driveway. There were lights on in an upstairs room, and on part of the first floor. If he waited for the last bit of light to seep behind the mountains he could Tom the ground-floor windows. He parked further down the street and sat in the car until the trees in Truax's yard were vague silhouettes.

—Dean Albarelli, "Cheaters," p. 399.

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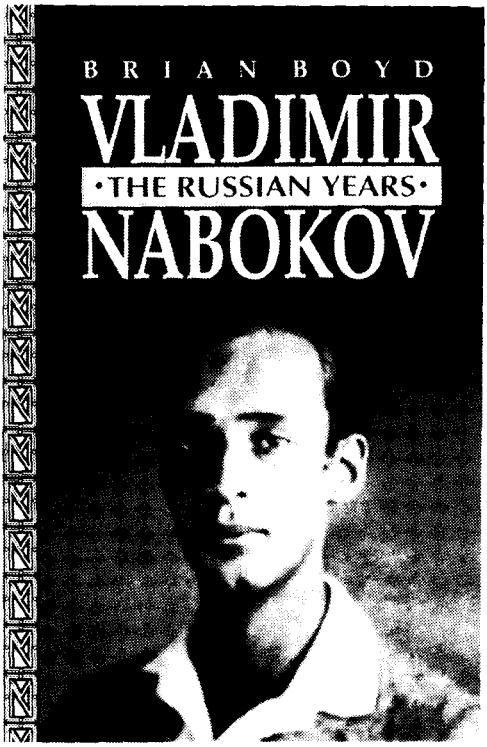

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